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Startup Capitalism: Gendered Transformations of Home, Work, and Value in Silicon Valley

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Publication Date

2021

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

SANTA CRUZ

STARTUP CAPITALISM:
GENDERED TRANSFORMATIONS OF HOME, WORK, AND VALUE
IN SILICON VALLEY

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

ANTHROPOLOGY

by

Caroline A. Kao

June 2021

The Dissertation of Caroline A. Kao is
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Interim Vice Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines reconfigurations of home and work, public and private, in the Silicon Valley-San Francisco Bay Area technology economy, and the implications they have for gendered hierarchies and cultures of work more broadly. Using fieldwork conducted amongst startup workers, freelancers, and salaried individuals at large tech companies throughout the San Francisco Bay Area, I examine these questions: how do startups reconfigure public and private in the name of meaningful work; what formative impact do these new arrangements have on individuals' identities, kinships, and life experiences? What are the historical specificities of how these social relations, beliefs and identities emerge through the Bay Area technology sector? What are the cultural, political, and economic shifts that make them seem natural and inevitable? The startup culture of Silicon Valley itself has radiating effects: it has become an icon of new, creative, American capitalism, and a model of urban development. Further, the platforms that it produces, which carry the industry's dense associations of progress and innovation, have remade social, financial, and spatial infrastructures far beyond the regional reach of Silicon Valley itself. This dissertation is a close look at what this influential work culture entails for its participants, those who supposedly benefit the most from it, as well as for the broader public.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I count myself as lucky to have found so many people who have supported me in innumerable ways.

To my dissertation committee: Lisa Rofel, my advisor, has unfailingly made space for me to be a whole human being. Despite her own ease at operating at the highest caliber of scholarly thought, Lisa has always encouraged me to cut through the academese, stay in touch with my passion and motivation, and trust in the writing process. Lisa never restricts her politics to the page, and I am grateful to have her as my advisor. Danilyn Rutherford has been a guiding inspiration over the years. Her bird's-eye view on the discipline, inventive lateral thinking, and ability to seamlessly move between theoretical genius and affable banter in one truly insightful sentence has pushed my own analysis in directions I never would have anticipated. Lastly, I can finally cross this finish line thanks in no small part to Jerry Zee's mentorship. Jerry's combination of effective practical advice and astute intellectual engagement helped shape my sloppy mess into a finished product, and made me laugh more than once in the process.

Other teachers have supported me in so many ways. Megan Moodie provided early feedback that changed my research project, and has always inspired me with her steadfast commitment to making feminist anthropology politically relevant. Melissa Caldwell, who started out as a teaching supervisor, made the time to be my departmental life line in the midst of the pandemic. Sharika Thiranagama has been

there through so many phone calls and lunch dates over the years, and even

graciously provided feedback on early drafts I was too scared to show to anyone else.

Although names are changed, I would like to acknowledge each and every one

of the informants who shared their experiences with me for this research. Thanks to

various institutions who have funded my research, including the National Science

Foundation Graduate Research Fellowship Program, the UC Chancellor's Fellowship

program, UCSC Regents and Anthropology Department.

I am indebted to many other scholarly communities that have changed my

thinking. The Techno-Optimism group, organized by Morgan Ames, Mark Gardiner,

and Damien Droney, and anonymous reviewers through *Science as Culture*, read

versions of Chapter 5 and provided excellent developmental feedback. The Cultures

of Finance working group, particularly Bob Meister and Ben Lee, read early drafts

and my research and helped me develop my own critical thoughts about finance.

There have been many writing groups and partnerships that helped keep me sane,

including many organized by Kali Rubaii, a friendship I cannot imagine my life

without.

None of this would have been possible without many incredible child care

providers, including Ali Hill, the teachers at UCSC EES, the teachers at Temple

Israel, and Linda and Caleb Wistar, who have gone above and beyond in their support

during the pandemic. Most of all, my partner, Aaron Wistar, has helped make this

dissertation a reality. Aaron listened to all of my unprocessed thoughts, encouraged

me when I got into spirals of despair, and gave immense intellectual energy and time to help me develop my ideas, often times to the detriment of his own work schedule.

I dedicate this dissertation to my children, without whom this dissertation would have surely been completed sooner, but it would have been far less joyful and meaningful. May their greatest inheritance be a more just world.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction:

Tech, Millennials, and the Meaning of Work

Early in my fieldwork, September 2016, the team at SwiftlyAI[1] invited me to tag along to a meetup they were attending after work. It was a regular meetup hosted at the Lyft headquarters, with speakers on different topics each time. As I walked through San Francisco's South of Market District to the meeting, I noticed a billboard advertisement for a combined dating and networking app called Bumble: "Be the CEO your parents wanted you to marry (*then find someone you actually like)*." As I came to learn through my fieldwork, entrepreneurship is omnipresent in the San Francisco Bay Area now, and for those who get to participate in the tech economy, it mediates all of life, including one's love life. I arrived at the Lyft headquarters, a sleek office complex located next to the Mission Bay that felt vast even as it contained a crowd of about 100 people. As I learned when I arrived, many people, including the SwiftlyAI team, attended these events to network in addition to attending for the panel discussion itself. That week, the panel happened to be called, "Sales Rookie to Enterprise Rockstar." People were on their phones or talking softly

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[1] In this dissertation, names of the startups I did fieldwork with and all individuals, regardless of employment, have been anonymized to preserve privacy. Names of large companies or companies that have gone public are as written. The only individuals who are not referred to with pseudonyms in the dissertation are those who participated in the Santa Cruz City Subcommittee on Short Term Vacation Rentals analyzed in Chapter 5, since these comments are on public record.

to others over beer and wine during the discussion. My attention hopped between the panel and other people. One panelist, a Senior Vice President of Sales for a tech company that was since acquired said, "Don't take a job where you're being sold a dream without any substance behind it…. That's how they're going to manage you." One panelist spoke at length about his individual journey of realizing that he was "at the mercy of decisions that I could've had an influence in." This was what it took to learn the "universal truths of upper management," and how he came to be "inquisitive, externally as internally." The panel discussion, like many events I attended during fieldwork, was less about anything particular to a job and more about cultivating an entrepreneurial ethic: how to cultivate habits and ways of thinking that help one rise to the level of active agent, and how not to become a passive, managed, worker.

After the panel discussion, I turned toward a group of men (the event was mostly men) who all looked to be in their 30s and introduced myself as a researcher studying the changing meaning of work. I explained that I was here to meet people working in the tech industry and learn more about what work life is like for them. As they realized I had no utility for them or their careers except as a novel conversation starter for talk amongst themselves, the dynamic quickly shifted. One of the men who had first introduced himself, now turned to speak toward the others and indirectly respond to me. He said in a tone that seemed to be searching for solidarity, "There's all this discussion about how millennials only care about meaningful work, but that's what you come here [San Francisco] for is the work culture. Right? You want to work

24-7 and be coked out all the time, you move to New York City. You want a family and a minivan, you move to middle America. You want to find meaningful work, you come here." The others nodded along emphatically.

This dissertation is about the cult of meaningful work in the Bay Area technology economy, known in contemporary American culture as Silicon Valley, or simply *tech*. What are the historical specificities of how these social relations, beliefs and identities emerge through the Bay Area technology sector? What are the cultural, political, and economic shifts that make them seem natural and inevitable? Using fieldwork conducted amongst startup workers, freelancers, and salaried individuals at large tech companies throughout the San Francisco Bay Area, I examine both these questions: what are conditions of emergence for the cult of meaningful work within the world of tech; how do startups reconfigure public and private in the name of meaningful work; and what formative impact do these new arrangements have on individuals? The culture itself has radiating effects: tech has become an icon of new, creative, American capitalism, representing progress away from the cold bureaucracies of yesteryear, as well as a model of urban development. Furthermore, the platforms that it produces, which carry the industry's dense associations of progress and innovation, have remade social, financial, and spatial infrastructures far beyond the regional reach of Silicon Valley itself. The new startup culture of work comes with many promises. This dissertation is a close look at what this culture entails for its participants, those who supposedly benefit the most from it, as well as for the broader public.

As I read back through my fieldnotes of this otherwise unnoteworthy day, I cannot help but feel that this comment succinctly summarizes many forces shaping the contemporary tech economy, albeit voiced with a certain arrogance that comes from a privileged subject position. Folded into the comment were generationally specific experiences of constraint shaped by financial booms and busts, the restructuring of higher education around student loan debt, and radical changes to the conditions of employment that made any semblance of "the American dream"— property ownership, a good job with benefits, with time left to live one's life— feel unobtainable for all but the most economically privileged. Here were the avenues left for financial security: finance, represented by "coked out" New York City; a passive, mediocre, and relatively passionless existence with a family represented by Minivan Midwest; and then, *the Bay Area tech economy*. I am reminded of how Hannah Arendt laments the "society of laborers" modern society has made of us, consumed with getting by, or conversely, a societal retreat to the intimacies of private life, where action and excellence are apparently nil (ultimately this is her most un-feminist position). In Arendt's view, both routes leave us unable to both "think what we are doing" and act politically in reflexive, concerted, world changing ways (Arendt 1958, 5). In the Silicon Valley version of the world, however, one's ascent to the height of human excellence is not achieved through the collective action of politics but through one's entrepreneurship. These subtleties of differentiated human activities get lost in the now dominant ideological metaphor of "work-life balance," that is implied in the comment above. But the problem it identifies nonetheless re-emerge in meaningful

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work as the solution. According to Silicon Valley, where other regions of the U.S. fail at work-life balance, the Bay Area tech economy offers a utopic alternative that resolves the tension once and for all: find work that is meaningful in itself, escape the balancing act altogether, make a killing and further human progress in the process.

Caring for Work: How I came to this project

I had long been interested in the intimacy of work, angered by how much it took from a person and so often did not return. While living in New York for my undergraduate education and Masters, I had become invested in domestic workers' rights struggles and heard story after story of how domestic workers gave their soul, sweat, and time to their charges. Domestic workers shaped who they became as people, yet their basic human dignity was so often disregarded by employers. As I turned my activist interests into academic ones, I realized that these domestic work relationships were actually "good to think with" for the intimate injustice of all work under capitalism. Caring for a child might be exceptionally personal labor to alienate, but that structure of having to give up a lifetime of formative experiences and vital energies to someone else just to make a living runs through the institution of work itself.

When I moved to California for my doctoral research, I was suddenly in close proximity to what was being hailed at the time as a utopic work world. People working at tech companies were working collaboratively in a place relatively free of hierarchy, they were making an impact on the world that recognized their

contribution, were generously compensated with high salaries, and were rewarded with nap rooms and massages. Of course, I had my doubts. I understood that larger companies relied essentially on a classed system—such a privileged existence usually relies on hiding hierarchy and exploitation. I grew up in Pittsburgh, a city full of monuments to how worker enrichment in the form of endowed libraries and museums were not worker empowerment; I knew tech companies' massive investments in the pampering of its subjects were gaming the system somehow. However, I was also intrigued by tech startups' claims to a different kind of workplace where everyone in the small team were close friends and had shared stakes in the company's success. What was it really like for people who made it in this world? Did these creature comforts give them a sense that they were cared for by their company? How was the supposedly egalitarian workplace actually experienced? Did intense feelings of social belonging ever pose problems to, for example, resistance to work?

I was gripped by the contradictions of this form of capitalism too, not just in its model of egalitarianism-through-exclusion, but for the very subjects it was presumed to privilege the most. Early on in my fieldwork, I attended a gathering in San Francisco hosted by one of my informants, mostly full of the people he had met through his tenure in a startup incubator. Two founders were discussing these contradictions: "People exaggerate stories of kids fresh out of college making 200k a year. Most of the time it's 115-120k. It's fucking nothing," said one of them. The other lamented, "We've never been so rich to be so poor." Most Americans would not scoff at a six-figure salary, but on the other hand, they raise an interesting point: why

were tech workers still choosing to stay when they could barely afford shared dormitory-like living space in the relatively boring, suburban town of Mountain View? At a time when many in my generational cohort were struggling, why was tech so flush with cash anyway? The VP of one of the companies I did fieldwork with said of their capital investments, "It's like monopoly money. It's almost unreal." I wanted to know more about the gravitational forces beyond high salaries that the tech industry clearly depended on and cultivated—all while spending and moving astronomical amounts of cash.

At the time of my fieldwork, the entire industry and region was charged with optimism and a sense that creativity could solve the world's problems. Academia is excellent at critique, but rarely do we discuss constructive ways forward. The tech industry, by contrast, has lofty goals and the resources to actually make changes, not through political struggle but through design. Could we really iteratively innovate our way out of injustice? Only two of the startups I conducted participant observation with had explicit justice-oriented goals (notably, both financial technology companies), but many of the individuals working across the tech industry viewed their work as making a better world. Some had accumulated enough capital to become angel investors and mentors to startups they saw as making a positive impact. What were the imaginative and material limits of these perspectives and goals? How did their experiences within the tech industry shape their notion of a socially just world? I wanted to know more about the constraints and conditions that shaped

people working within the tech world so that I could understand the limits of these perspectives from the ground up.

Digital Ventures: neoliberalism, finance, and tech in the U.S.

Though my fieldwork started out as questioning the changing meaning of work in technology companies, it was not long before I realized this inquiry was inseparable from the financial conditions that constituted the industry itself and culturally shaped the region of the Bay Area. In the United States, from the 1970s onward, salaried work has been shaped by the rapid growth of financial markets and speculative forms of accumulation, the emergence of flexible production regimes reliant on information technology and precarious labor, and the scaling back of public safety nets in favor of marketized alternatives—often termed financialization, post-Fordism, and neoliberalism respectively.

Since these terms are subject to many different and competing accounts, it is worth briefly defining how these terms will be used in the dissertation, and how they broadly relate. Neoliberalism refers to a set of policies that stem from the Chicago School idea that market rationality is the most efficient mechanism for promoting individual, social and economic development.[2] While human capital as a concept existed prior to this moment, the Chicago School economists centered human capital,

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[2] There are other implications of neoliberalism as it influenced international policies that are not addressed here, including the spread of International Monetary Fund mandated structural adjustment policies. My focus here on neoliberalism as a conservative economic discourse within the United States is led by my fieldsite.

and the individual responsibility for developing it, in new ways that alter metrics of productivity and performance in economic life (Becker 1964).[3] It also idealizes the efficiency of financial markets in allocating investment capital, and stresses maximization of shareholder value as the principal ethical imperative of business managers (Fama 1970; Friedman 1970). Financialization refers to a confluence of historical trends that created an opening for these ideas to be realized in the United States as postwar prosperity and nationally-bounded finance gave way to financial deregulation and global capital inflows (Krippner 2012).

The expansion of the financial sector that ensued helped shift the locus of capitalist accumulation from one of material production to one of financial gain. As corporate governance was progressively reoriented around shareholder value, the character of salaried work changed. Salaried workers were hired and managed as human capital, and indeed, encouraged to imagine that they had a capital stake in their own success. A post-Fordist ethos emerged that valorized entrepreneurial flexibility and retreated from the normative ideal of the Fordist family wage.

Neoliberals and social conservatives alike proposed the financialization of family life as the new social safety net in response to the crisis of the Fordist family (Cooper 2017). This meant that cuts to public spending dovetailed with the growth of private debt. The logic of capitalization entered the home: parents borrowed against the expectation of future increases in real estate prices, and children took out student

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[3] See also, Michel Foucault, Chapter 9 in Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the College de France, 1978-1979.

loans against the promise that their academic credential would eventually allow them to climb the income ladder. Intergenerational wealth transfers within families, mediated by financial markets and techniques of financial valuation, increasingly overshadowed wage income as the main determinant of economic security (Adkins, Cooper, and Konings 2020). The disciplining of the family— including the pathologizing of Black unmarried mothers and the rewarding of male head of household, heterosexual families— previously enabled by the welfare state and the "family wage," which conservatives felt was under attack by the sexual revolution and the liberalization of family law (for example, no-fault divorce), was replaced with the discipline of financial markets. The rise of speculative appreciation, combined with tandem wage stagnation, made sexual normativity an essential conduit for intergenerational wealth transmission.

These changes to processes of capitalist production and capitalist relations were only intensified by the rise of the digital economy. Furthermore, the very tech economy that is the site of my fieldwork would not exist as such without the intertwining of technology and finance. Although, with the exception of Chapter 5, I generally do not focus on technology itself, the intersection of tech and finance undergirds what I write about. It constrains what is made possible and made to seem necessary. It both motivates subjects (in the case of capital gains) and disciplines subjects (through novel modes of relating that are built into financial technologies). Furthermore, the very tech economy that is the site of my fieldwork would not exist as such without the intertwining of technology and finance.

When scholars speak of the rise of "cognitive capitalism" or the "information economy" in countries like the United States—that is, the shift from material production to IT and communication industries—this story cannot be detached from a story of financialization because these two systemic economic shifts are intrinsically related.[4] Intellectual property (without which the tech sector would be groundless), the virtualization of much of economic life, and the widespread adoption of smartphone usage all make for the type of rapidly scalable model of growth that has historically been attractive to financial speculators. These features are characteristic of the temporality and genre of post-Fordist capitalist production. As Melinda Cooper, one of the most astute critics of financialization, writes in her study of the U.S. biotech sector, "Post-Fordism relies much more immediately on economies of innovation, scope, and preemption—the ability to anticipate the next wave, to keep ahead of the curve—than the economies of scale associated with the mass reproduction of commodities." Where Fordist production was directly concerned with maximizing material output, in post-Fordism, intellectual property rights allow one to

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[4] Much has already been written about this shift and it has been extensively critiqued. Debates center around whether the scholarly interest in these forms of "immaterial" production stem from changes in capitalism as such or whether they stem from changes that affect only a relatively narrow stratum of privileged workers (Fatone 2007). Many have argued, rightfully so, that plenty of the world's labor is still very much tied to factory labor production and that historical over-emphasis on cognitive work reinforces the marginalization of this labor in academic literature (Wilson et al. 2012). However, financialization means that immense capital gains are now made from the stock performances of companies, de-emphasizing brick and mortar production from a macro-economic and thus, capitalist perspective. This has changed the architecture of working in industry in ways that legitimately call for further analysis.

"generate and capture production itself" in a patent. The focus is on capturing legal claims to the "*principle of generation*" of commodities more than directly maximizing output (Cooper 2008, 24).

Cooper's "principle of generation" refers specifically to biological patents that institute ownership rights over processes of producing genetically modified organisms. For the tech sector I am concerned with in my fieldwork, the relevant principle of generation is not a biological patent but a computer-coded one—the platform. Although the term "platform" has been used metaphorically in economic anthropology to characterize the broader global capitalist economy (Guyer 2016) and has been criticized by others in media studies for neutralizing the politics of technology companies (Gillespie 2010), the term continues to be in use because it accurately describes a type of rapidly scalable technology business model for which data is crucial. At their core, platforms are "digital infrastructures that enable two or more groups to interact" (Srnicek 2016, 45). Platforms include both the user-facing platforms that we are all familiar with (Uber, Airbnb, Google, etc.), and business-facing software-as-a-service (SaaS) companies, such as Salesforce and Amazon Web Services (AWS), which host the lion's share of online business communication and commerce. It is this rapidly scalable model of production, and the temporality it entails, that all of the tech startups I worked with are working within.

The symbiosis between finance and tech only deepened as central bank responses to financial crises facilitated further financialization by depressing interest rates. As Nick Srnicek explains in *Platform Capitalism*, "the generalised low interest

rate environment built by central banks has reduced the rate of return on a wide range of financial assets. The result is that investors seeking higher yields have had to turn to increasingly risky assets – by investing in unprofitable and unproven tech companies, for instance" (2016, 30). Tech companies are particularly attractive to yield-hungry investors for two reasons. First, the rapid scalability of tech production makes quick, potentially exorbitant returns, seem eminently possible. Second, the mobility of intellectual property (as opposed to fixed capital investments, such as factories) makes it easier for tech companies to avoid taxes, further enhancing prospective profitability. Srnicek suggests that these measures all mutually reinforce a financialized tech sector as a new model of growth for American capitalism.

While to a layperson, the success of the tech sector may seem a natural outgrowth of the vision and creativity of Silicon Valley's world-changing innovations, in reality it is the result of political-economic restructuring and legal-material affordances. The financialization of economic life forms the background of daily struggles and fields of action, through which categories of value, innovation, and creativity are made. It shapes the everyday experiences of my informants. As a part of their generational cohort (millennial), it shapes my experiences as well. How did millennials come to be defined by meaningful work, selfies, or student debt? Clickbait think-pieces heralding the generation of narcissism aside, one of the only realities millennials actually have in common is that we are the first cohort to experience the tail-to-end restructuring of the economy around financial assets (Adkins, Cooper, and Konings 2020). This economic restructuring is a condition that

connects all of my chapters, from the startup's making of domesticated workspace to the platform company's assetization of residential real estate in new ways. My fieldwork simply could not be understood without this political and economic history.

The aspects of everyday life that I study in this dissertation—eating, cohabitation, coworking, and gender—are inextricable from the network of the overlapping and overdetermined forces described above. In the subjective experience of my informants, however, the concomitant and interacting historical development of neoliberalism, financialization and post-Fordism is rarely decomposed into three distinct (even if related) categories. For this reason, in what follows, I use the terms somewhat interchangeably. Rather than limiting myself and my analysis to one set of literature, I would rather keep such macroeconomic shifts in readers' minds by using them liberally. For my purposes, these terms refer both to macroeconomic and policy formations as well as the subjective experience of them by flexible workers subject to a culture of human capital and involved in speculative asset economies.

I want to be clear—I am not suggesting that neoliberalism, financialization, and postfordism are the real stories of capitalism and culture is merely content for its comparison. Nor do I intend to give the impression of capitalism itself as an abstract, hegemonic, singular agent of change. As the dissertation unfolds, it should become clear through my ethnographic analysis that capitalism is not a pre-given logic operating on individuals but something that emerges in, and is transformed by,

everyday practice.[5] This summary of the past few decades of structural economic changes is meant to provide historical context for my fieldwork and shed light on the tech-financial-social force fields that make millennials, particularly Bay Area technology workers, "only care about meaningful work."

From Finance to Feminism

In a post-Fordist, innovation-driven economy, financial performance as the basis of value obscures and changes the relationship between labor and value and cuts through the classic economic dichotomy of life and work. The colonization of life by work has led some American scholars writing about post-Fordism to turn to autonomist Marxism, a strand of Italian Marxism rooted in the refusal of productivism and, especially, the refusal to identify the working class narrowly with the paid, "productive" labor of wage-earners (see, e.g., Witheford 1994; Hardt 1999; Weeks 2011). As the Zerowork Collective put it, this tradition stresses that "the working class is defined by its struggle against capital and not by its productive function" (1975, 3). Particularly relevant for my purposes is a strand of Marxist-feminist thought that is related to (but rarely gets serious consideration from) Italian male Autonomist Marxist writers themselves: those texts associated with Wages for Housework/Wages Against Housework Campaign of the 1970s. Viewed as a political

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[5] This understanding of capitalism is, of course, indebted to a robust body of scholarship within anthropology on capitalism as a transnational, emergent phenomena that continuously draws on and contributes to the formation of supposedly non-economic domains, like gender, race, and religion (see Rofel and Yanagisako 2019; Tsing 2009; Gibson-Graham 2006).

perspective that emerged from the demand for wages and not merely as a demand for the a wage as an end in itself, Wages for Housework sought to problematize the relationship between women and capitalism—to draw attention to how "the community," "the social factory," or society itself, was involved in in capitalist relations and the circuit of valorization (Dalla Costa and James 1975). The wage in itself serves to obscure the unwaged labor of women's work, which could never be considered as such because, unmediated by the wage and naturalized as the activity and desires stemming from innate feminine attributes, capital transforms it into an act of love. Furthermore, autonomist Marxist-feminists sought to highlight how the ideology and institution of the family enables the capitalist organization of work by providing low- to no-cost social reproduction and establishing the expectation that this was indeed the responsibility of the family, and not, for example, the responsibility of the welfare state.

Returning to this theory gives us a different analytic purchase on understanding contemporary trends in capitalism. Neferti Tadiar argues that, by identifying how "the sign systems of gender and value are constitutively related," Marxist feminist theories of capitalism historicize "the so-called feminization of labor [as] the realization of a historical tendency rather than, as the discourse of crisis would have it, a radically new development" (2009, 32–33). In the 1980s, other Marxist-feminists also highlighted that in the capitalist circuit of production, the reproduction of life and labor-power cannot be taken for granted when capitalist

accumulation has depended on the violent control over and exhaustion of the reproductive capacities of slaves and colonial subjects (Davis 1981; Spivak 1988).

In other words, by focusing on "the domesticated woman" (Rubin 1975), the family and community as capitalism's most indispensable means of production as opposed to the waged laborer in isolation, Marxist-feminists have been theorizing "human capital" and responsibility for its development or exhaustion since before the time when these ideas were just beginning to be introduced in neoliberalism. As such, Marxist-feminist theory runs through this dissertation as analytic lenses that problematize a relation between work and life that has become ever more complicated through financialization. Does the domestication of workspace, including the nap rooms, massages, and luxuriously catered lunches enjoyed by technologists at large companies, valorize reproduction in new ways? How does the shift from production to financial performance as the basis of value change the gendering of these economic categories, and potentially their valorization as well?

Affective Regimes: Gut Management

Political theorist Wendy Brown writes that "neoliberalism governs as sophisticated common sense" (2015, 35). But she leaves it to the reader's imagination to surmise what, exactly, this sophisticated common sense entails. Affect theory and ethnography are crucial means of tracing relationships between the economic policy changes of the past few decades and the lived experiences of financialization. This dissertation is inspired by and builds on bodies of scholarship that oscillate between

analysis of conditions, material and affective, that cultivate that "sophisticated common sense" and the historical shifts that enable them. How are tech workers' affective attachments to work generated from economic-structural conditions of their employment? How do they in turn generate a different form of worker subjectivity amenable to producing value in a financialized market? How does affective investment in work reconfigure basic reproduction of one's vital energies and ability to work— i.e. eating, sleeping, socializing?

I understand studies of affect to be extensions of the Marxist-feminist insight into how the category of life known as reproduction (biological, cultural, subjective) works as a nexus not just for the lived experience of diffuse power in late capitalist economies but for its disciplinary execution as well. Affect invites anthropologists in particular to attend to "the ways that passions pass between bodies" as well as the power relations at work that shape "the feeling of having a feeling" (Rutherford 2016, 287, 289). As William Mazzarella writes, "Affect is not… a radical site of otherness to be policed or preserved but rather a necessary moment of any institutional practice with aspirations to public efficacy …. [A]ny social project that is not imposed through force alone must be affective in order to be effective" (2009, 298–99). A disciplinary regime (such as the discourses that make us working subjects), is compelling precisely because it is both "generalizing and impersonal" *and* because it "gets us in the gut" (2009, 299).

As I listened to tech workers evangelize about the social movement created by tech, about their company's ability to change the world, or their exuberance about the

workplaces and coworking teams they loved, it became clear that I had to attend to what was getting them in the gut. As the dissertation unfolds, so too does an understanding of where these affective forces come from—the feelings of identification with a company, the sense of importance and innovation, the familial obligations to one another, and the hopes and aspirations that tech can do better by communities because it knows them better than they know themselves.

In contrast to nostalgic critiques of late capitalism that portray a progress of alienation and the hollowing out of intimacy into contractual relationships (e.g. Hochschild 1997), studies of affect and neoliberalism have argued that neoliberal governance remains invested in the cultivation of affective attachments, including feelings of intimacy and immediacy between subjects. Andrea Muehlebach (2012), for example, examines the erosion of the welfare state in Italy and finds that the bonds of society associated with the welfare state have not gotten weaker, as some suggest. Rather, the success of "third way" politics rescales those bonds and redistributes responsibility for the reproduction of society through the immediacy between citizens. The neoliberal state, Muehlebach argues, no longer considers society as an a priori object but something that must be built by citizens themselves: "Rather than feel attached to the state— and make demands on it— citizens are to attach themselves to each other, through spontaneous, sympathetic acts" (2012, 69). In tech startups, where coworkers are also often friends, how might affective attachments be a conduit for the redistribution of responsibility to work? How might notions of changing the world for the better, and indeed, society for the better as some

informants suggest, also be acting as neoliberal virtues?

Beyond the labors of housework, sex work, and childcare, affect studies draw attention to the structured distribution of exhaustion, endurance, and the "slow death" of forms of life that either do not fit into productive capitalist relations or that are made precarious by them (Berlant 2007; Povinelli 2011). They also provide insight into the social reproduction of normativity, or why a subject's desires for belonging, reciprocity, and happiness "stick" to normative practices even as they are objects that entail that subject's attrition (Ahmed 2004; 2010; Berlant 2011). In this way, the analysis of affect brings together the feminist Marxist imperative to attend to often unremunerated everyday activities involved in the reproduction of life with the biopolitical insight that the sovereignty of states is exercised through "a power to *foster* life or *disallow* it to the point of death" (Foucault 1978, 138). A key question of this dissertation is: What forms of life are being fostered in the financialized tech economy and which are disallowed?

In my research, the insights from this body of scholarship act as a lens through which I conducted my fieldwork and they profoundly shaped my questions and analysis. As my informants expressed time and again, tech work is not just a job; it is a movement to change work itself, a utopian work world in which workers produce creatively, collaboratively, and voluntarily because they like their team and their jobs. As one informant who worked at Airbnb said, "The only people who don't like working on weekends are the people who hate their job." What material and economic conditions shape these affective attachments to work? What happens to

tensions, conflicts, and even hostile experience of power dynamics when enmeshed in these work relations—resignified as total social relations? These investments in work (as freedom, as family, as the site for changing the world) require affective analysis to understand. In my interviews with both contractors and non-managerial workers from different backgrounds, I was closely attuned to understanding the affective contours of their relationships to their work and coworkers. Building on existing ethnographic knowledge of the affective "grip" of neo-management discourses on workers' subjectivity (Thrift 2005; see also Boltanski and Chiapello 2005), my research examines how these discourses are imbued into work-life conditions and everyday practices.

The Anthropology of Work and the Technology Industry

This dissertation builds on other ethnographic analyses of how financialization and neoliberalism change the institution of work and the subjectivity of workers in ways that profoundly alter the interface between work and life. This dichotomy between work and life is itself the subject of my inquiry in many ways—how it has been historically produced, what efficacy it has for capitalist processes of production, and why it might be changing now through financialized worlds of technology startups. In the age of the obligatory self-as-business model of employment (Gershon 2017), general self-subjectivation through "soft skill" cultivation and "bundles of skills" (Urciuoli 2008), and the "human capital" approach corporate restructuring for financial performance (Becker 1964), the recruitment of

supposedly non-work life to potential value production has never been more palpable, or more measurable.

Ethnographic studies of technology workers specifically shed light on neoliberalism as a lived experience, sometimes cultivated in particular corporate cultures. Jan English-Lueck has done extensive research on cultures of technology work in Silicon Valley through the Silicon Valley Cultures Project. This research has examined pluralistic wellness and health practices of high-tech workers, time constraints in dual-career tech families, and the permeation of technology into everyday life through work (Darrah, Freeeman, and English-Lueck 2007; English-Lueck 2010). More recently, working with a local think tank, Institute for the Future, in collaboration with Google, English-Lueck and Miriam Lueck Avery (2014) have also examined "corporate care" practices, or companies' extension of care to employees. These studies, which draw on decades of research, represent a significant contribution to our understanding of technology workers in Silicon Valley, and produce valuable information and insights about the everyday lives of technologists in these larger companies and about the culture of Silicon Valley more generally. My research departs from this work, however, in that 1) I focus more on startups and the experience of individuals moving through the startup world than larger technology companies, although these larger companies also feature as influential in the culture of Silicon Valley and 2) more importantly, I am interested in how concepts like *productivity*, *value*, *innovation*, and *family* are produced, whereas in this body of research, these are codified as categories of analysis.

Anthropologist Carrie Lane (2011) analyzes the experience of the flexible career trajectory in high technology industries of Dallas, Texas. Lane is especially interested in the experience of unemployment as they intersect with gender roles and the norms of heterosexual romantic relationships. Lane finds that the norm of flexible employment frees men from societal burdens and rewards their dependence in heterosexual relationships as gender progressive, whereas the same periods of unemployment affect heterosexual women in the opposite way, causing them shame and embarrassment for their dependency and lack of career (Lane 2009). Furthermore, Lane argues that technologists are not just brought together in a particular industry but by "a neoliberal faith in individual agency, the logic and efficiency of the free market, and the naturalness of the status quo system of insecure employment" (2011, 4). Following Lane, I am also interested how "neoliberal faith" infuses participation in a high tech economy, and how new forms of work intersect with formations of gender.

Ethnographic studies of categories of cognitive work, immaterial labor, or knowledge work, importantly demonstrate that, despite the terminology, these labors are still very much grounded in material and embodied realities. Sareeta Amrute's (2016) ethnography of Indian IT workers in Berlin challenges the Italian Autonomist notion of the cognitariat as an unmarked worker, demonstrating that race and racialization are actually central to how Indian IT workers produce value. Like Amrute, I also find analytic purchase to working with autonomist Marxist theory. While I observed comparable instances of potentially autonomous spaces amongst

23

some of my informants, particularly when in their private homes, my dissertation is less concerned than both Amrute and the Marxists with finding an autonomous line of flight and hidden resistances in the lives of my subjects. This is mainly because *they* were not very concerned with it, even those who were forced to navigate the racial and gender dynamics of Silicon Valley. In my fieldwork in Santa Cruz, where informants were actively resisting a tech company through policy advocacy, I was surprised and intrigued by the simultaneous attraction to those tech companies, the desire to identify them with progress, sometimes despite the companies' active role in my informants' displacement. The cultural enchantment of tech startups, their utopic promises of a progressive kind of capitalism, and the cult-like devotion to parafamilial workplaces—all these feature far more prominently in my dissertation than questions of resistance.

Methodology:

I conducted fieldwork from January 2016 to June 2017, with stints of follow-up research in the form of visits and interviews between 2018 and 2019. There were immense obstacles to obtaining access. While plenty of individuals would meet with me for a single coffee meeting or office visit, establishing ongoing relationships and even ongoing presence of the sort that facilitated participant observation proved difficult. It is a standard practice for people who work in technology companies to sign non-disclosure agreements, which I sometimes was also required to sign to even enter an office. However, despite my official and unofficial reassurances that names

would be changed and company interests protected, the idea of an outside observer taking notes on unspoken company culture dynamics and writing about it was seen by some as a potential distraction at best, and at worst, a liability to public image. This was frustrating and comical to me as a gross overestimation of the audience size for a dissertation and a misunderstanding of the difference between scholarship and journalism. As a result of this, especially in the beginning months of my fieldwork, I relied heavily on cultivating individual relationships instead of company relationships. Meetings took place outside the context of work at first, over mid-morning coffee breaks, lunch breaks, and happy hours, and eventually moved into the workday. Sometimes, my meetings would amount to one interview, a potential follow up interview, an hour or two of office observation, and nothing more. However, in a few instances, these individual relationships developed with enough trust that I was allowed a more ongoing presence in the daily grind of a company.

Another major obstacle related to accessibility of conducting my fieldwork was the extremely high cost of living. Even with roommates, I simply could not afford to live in the cities where these companies were located without taking on debt. At first, fieldwork was intermittent. I would drive from Santa Cruz to a scattering of meetings or events throughout the region, working in coworking spaces or coffee shops in between to type up fieldnotes. I eventually established strong enough relationships with individuals in Oakland, San Francisco, and Mountain View that I was allowed to sleep on couches and futons to extend my fieldwork stays by several days. While my experiences in these homes inform my research and insights, and

some descriptions of them do make it into my chapters, I do not write about my time in them. It was a gift I am grateful for and writing about this off the record time seems a violation of unspoken rules.

My research questions at the start related to the changing meaning of work, the altered arrangements of domestic work, and its implications for gendered hierarchies of value. I wanted to get a sense of how differently positioned subjects in Silicon Valley, including food service and domestic workers, contribute to the transformation of work, life and gender, as they negotiate technological interventions in the organization of labor and the provision of reproduction. However, as I conducted my fieldwork, learned more about the technology industry, and homed in on the startup as a particular social formation, the following questions emerged more clearly: 1) Affective Management: How do democratized and informalized workplaces of startups cultivate affective regimes that further facilitate value production? How do workers actually experience the absence of formal structures of management? (2) Everyday Inequality: Does the no-collar workplace create unseen burdens that implicitly reproduce existing social hierarchies? What work is being done by everyday life practices to register and reinforce social differences? (3) Forms of Value: How does participation in a venture capital driven economy impact the spatiality and temporality of production? How do technologists themselves understand the value they produce? Given the historical imbrication of gender and economy, and the hierarchical relation between public and private life to the economy, does the tech economy interface between life and work transform gender in

new ways? (4) Platform Impact: How does the experience of startup work in Silicon Valley translate into the technological products themselves? What value systems are implicit in these platform products? How are reconfigurations of public/private, experienced within startup cultures themselves, influencing the products?

To address these questions, I conducted semi-structured interviews with workers from different technology startups and workers at larger technology companies fashioned off of a startup model of creativity and innovation. These interviews took place in co-working spaces, coffee shops, and other places where workers socialized in locations around Mountain View, Menlo Park, Palo Alto, and San Francisco. Sometimes, these would entail walking interviews in which the subject narrated the landscape of the neighborhood, allowing me to observe their interactions in the broader geography of the region as well as other people on the street. This also revealed the extent to which spatial proximity and location mattered for informants. Eventually, I conducted participant-observation in coworking and office spaces, shadowed startup workers in offices, and was also received in homes, which often overlapped. I also attended networking events, gatherings, and meetups, which allowed me to blend into a group conversation. This participant-observation enabled me to analyze the materiality of melded co-working/co-living spaces and observe the social dynamics of interactions as they unfolded. Participant-observation of workers at work and home was especially informative when observing how subjects interacted with conditions of extreme inequality, such as in food service or

gender dynamics, as it revealed aspects of life that went unmentioned because they were either taken for granted or not a point of pride.

Although it does not make it into my dissertation, I also conducted semi-structured interviews with people who used independent contracting platforms. In this context, I offered a small amount of compensation for their time. I asked about how they decided what work was worth their time, how they felt about the companies profiting from their labor, and tried to ascertain how the gig-work found through apps affected the temporality of their everyday lives. To understand more about how startups companies themselves related to the independent contractors that used their platforms, I also went through the onboarding process to become an independent contractor for two different platforms, TaskRabbit and Wonolo. I participated in the required trainings and attempted to find work through these apps, which, contrary to promises of working on chosen time, proved actually quite difficult if you have any schedule. This participant-observation provided an opportunity to learn about the experience of on-demand platform work and meet others in this position. My research here informs my understanding of technology startups and their broader impacts even if the fieldwork itself does not appear in this dissertation.

Finally, I interviewed people impacted by the growth of one particular type of startup, platforms for listing short term vacation rentals, in the city of Santa Cruz to investigate the consequences of the product beyond the startup itself. I served on a local city subcommittee to develop recommendations for how to regulate short-term rental growth created by technology companies. Between interviewing residents and

participating in the subcommittee (which was composed mostly of property owners and landlords), I observed a range of ways the city was changed by these technology companies. While the location of this fieldwork is definitely in the periphery of Silicon Valley (Santa Cruz is sometimes referred to as "Silicon Beach"), it demonstrated the extent to which startup ethics impact rental and real estate dynamics near and far.

Chapter overview:

In Chapter 2, "Home Economics: Spatial Reconfigurations of Financialized Compensation," I assess the relationship between the intimate home-like spaces that startups work in, as well as the affective relationships between coworkers and between workers and the company itself. While many authors have analyzed financialization as a compression of time and reshaping of temporality through quarterly metrics and speculative ethics (see, e.g., Konings 2018), this chapter tackles the question of how such changes impact the organization of space and its impact on workers. Setting the stage for the rest of the dissertation, I give some historical background on how the political imperative to develop areas of San Francisco through the attraction of rapidly scalable technology startups remade urban space and how the insular and staccato funding structure of technology startups is embedded in Silicon Valley neighborhood space. I also closely analyze the workspaces of two of the technology startups I did fieldwork with. Next, I examine how financialized employment contracts, a relatively recent historical development that has now

become a standard in technology startups, are changing the nature of the relationship between worker and company. How does the compensation with stock options alter the contractual equation of mutually disinterested parties in ways that betray their easy separation? In what ways does the shared space itself reflect and reinforce the ego-braiding of worker and company? With an eye to the organization of each room, I examine the resignification of workspace as domestic space, and of former homes as offices, as part of a complex of disciplinary mechanisms through which worker and company interests are harmonized for the production of financial value.

Chapter 3, "From 10xers to Carrot Choppers: Food, Creativity, and Value in Technology Companies," I consider how the metric of performance, for both the company's stock value and the evaluation of an individual employee's company contributions, transforms a cornerstone of the capitalist day: the work lunch. Without prompting on my part, the subject of food, what workers are buying to eat (in startups), or offered to eat (in larger companies), the quality of lunch, and who foots the bill came up time and again in my fieldwork. The provision of food is a massive investment for companies, many who are taking the engineering of options and quality of offerings to new micromanaging extremes. Why are everyday eating practices important to technologists and the companies they work for? How are technologists relating their form of cognitive labor, their innovative value-potential, and the sustenance they use to produce it? Using the Marxist-feminist analysis of reproduction—or the maintenance of biological and cultural selves ready to work— and of the feminized relation to value, I consider how consumption practices are

30

being used to reify performative value, even as the category of value itself becomes increasingly abstracted from concrete measures of productivity. I look at two seemingly contrasting lunch practices: the meal replacement and creative catering. While at first glance, these seem like opposite approaches, they stem from a similar performance of innovation and of the conflation of labor and capital itself. I question how these performances, which are tied to financial value, might also implicitly reproduce the hierarchies of value, reflected in the structure of subcontracting used to differentiate food service workers from innovation workers.

In Chapter 4, "The Progressive Hypothesis: Freedom Through Work in Tech's Fraternal Patriarchy," I consider whether or not there is a kernel (or more) of truth to the cultural comparisons of startups to American college fraternities. How does rampant "tech bro" misogyny exist alongside the anti-hierarchical, progressive ethos that the technology industry prides itself on? In an industry that most workers feel is driving a social movement for better work, how do instances of misogyny become normalized? First, drawing on interviews and accounts of meaningful work, I trace an ethos of work as freedom back to a regional ties to the countercultural revolution and intentional communities. I then consider how the harmonious picture of work as family has historical precedence as a movement within management theory to soften workplace frictions and provide recognition and psychological rewards for workers. At the same time, could the new familial workplace actually be enabling of the gendered power dynamics referenced with *fraternity*? Analyzing my participant observations of coworker interactions and one informant's accounts of her

31

experiences, I suggest that these are manifestations of what I call "fraternal patriarchy" in everyday life. I analyze the sexual logics at work in these interactions, and demonstrate how the integrated life-work personhood embodied in the startup-as-family places new burdens on workers to affectively neutralize the sexual harassment they experience. Furthermore, I consider whether or not the fraternal patriarchy of the technology industry is an echo of a modern, social contract culture, in which revolution itself is a fraternal progress narrative. To conclude, I suggest fraternal patriarchy in tech is reinforced through, not in contradiction with, the new "brotherhood" formed by the startup world's ostensible embrace of egalitarian, progressive values.

In an effort to trace the far-reaching effects of technology industry approaches to value, Chapter 5, "Economies of ignorance: Dark data, platform companies, and the public imagination" leaves the startup workplace itself and instead examines the impacts of one particular form of startup technology platform, short-term vacation rentals (STVR), on the local politics of Santa Cruz, California. Echoing the approaches of startup houses I examine in Chapter 2, STVR platforms blur the boundaries between domestic and work life in new ways that are shaped by the speculative markets they also participate in and contribute to. I analyze the impact of these speculative dynamics as an extension of a financialized ethic cultivated in Silicon Valley startups, which reframes life, including domestic life, through the potential for speculative asset appreciation. These reconfigurations of public and private translate into the production of data as well. Protected by privacy law, the data

created by platform usage remains under strict lock and key by companies, creating a black box around the impact and scale of the phenomenon itself all while fetishizing this data as immediated, objective truth. How does this manufactured ignorance, and awareness of such non-knowledge, impact the relationship between a public, the data produced by platform usage, and the ability to regulate it? What lasting impacts does this platform mediation have on the dynamics of rent and real estate itself? The public discourse from which regulation emerges is fundamentally shaped and constrained by demands for and references to what I theorize as *dark data*, or privatized data produced through and owned by platform companies that is nonetheless objective in the public imagination. Through analysis of short-term vacation rental platforms and fieldwork on a city council-convened subcommittee for the development of regulation, I examine how dark data impacts the political imagination and thus, the process of developing regulations, enabling the future viability and growth of platforms within the city. The dissertation thus moves from the intimate space of the startup to the impact of startup technologies on users, and is bookended by these two instantiations of the assetization of home through technology companies.

To conclude, I consider what these different slices of Silicon Valley life tell us about the model of work that has become an icon of progressive capitalism and the implications it might have for others in the U.S. economy. Beholden to venture capital and diffusely managed through the affective intimacy of teams, technology startups of the San Francisco Bay Area pressure-cook new everyday ways of relating work to life that challenge prior historical understandings of the employment

relationship and the imbrication of work and life. This reframing of everyday life for workers is inextricably linked to Silicon Valley startup work culture, its implicit gender hierarchy, and its reconfiguration of public and private for the maximization of financial value. I argue that these work ethics are imbued not only into the scalable model of work relations that have become an icon of innovative workplaces but also into the production of new platform technologies, and therefore have far greater impact than the Silicon Valley startup world itself.

CHAPTER 2

Home Economics:

Spatial Reconfigurations of Financialized Compensation

One starting point for this dissertation was my experience of living in a shared home in Santa Cruz. Six months after relocating from the East Coast, I moved into a room formerly occupied by Tim, a PhD student in the UCSC computer science department and shared the home with another computer science PhD, Nigel. At the time, Nigel, a sardonic Black man from Jamaica who loved pop music, heavily lubricated parties, and teaching piano to kids from his LDS church on weekends, had already completed a few summer internships with technology companies when I moved in. As a result, corporate swag littered the homescape: branded backpacks, water bottles, mugs, blankets, and mini-soccer balls. This slow trickle of peculiar branded detritus created a pervasive presence for the companies in our most intimate environments— we used the mugs for brushing our teeth or getting our morning coffee, used blankets for picnics, and mini-soccer balls facilitated both fidgeting and casual games of catch over evening conversations. They engulfed us in a corporate economy of gifting and the expectation of indebtedness to these companies (although neither Nigel or myself ever felt as much) while entering our own interpersonal economy as well. And they kept coming. Towards the end of his degree, Nigel was on the job market. After each interview, he would come home with armfuls of free merchandise covered in primary-colored logos—a technique of giving intended to

foster belonging amongst new recruits before they are even hired (Ho 2009). When Nigel eventually took a job at Google, the company started to subsidize our shared internet bill, as they do with all employees—certainly, a more welcome and useful gift than another branded mug. I asked Nigel about why Google would do this. He explained, the understanding was that his internet connectivity at home was as crucial to the productive workday as it was at work.

These gifts affect the future employee through the duration of their possession, giving the companies a durable presence that extends well beyond a short site visit and interview. Importantly, these companies deliberately distributed domestic items, to be used both in the home and as a bridge between office and home. Before even extending a job offer, tech companies intimately infiltrated the prospective employee's material sense of self through ubiquitous presences and reminders in space as well as time. This braiding of tech company brands with employees' non-work homescapes sets the stage for further affective investment of worker identities into their work.

These corporate gifting practices reflect a broader cultural norm within the technology sector of Silicon Valley that one's work is more than just a job—it is an intimate extension of who a person is in the world, and the activity they love to do. In the dominant narrative of work in the contemporary tech world, finding the right work is as profound an undertaking, and as profoundly transformative, as a great romantic love. Just as cohabitation performs and transforms a romantic relationship, the spaces of startups shape the relationship between worker and company. The

home-like workspace, and in some cases the home-as-workspace, immerses the worker's identity in the transformation of value through always-on labor time by creating and structurally mirroring a relatedness to work that is intimately entangled with the self.

This chapter addresses the ways that startup culture configures the personal relationship between self and work by organizing and structuring space—particularly domestic and work space—in a way that serves the financialized production of value. While other chapters address how the affective labor relationship extends beyond work itself into the disciplining of the body, here, I ask, how do the live-work arrangements of startups generate intimate attachments to and affective investments in work? How do the living and working conditions of startup workers both reflect and reinforce their financial relationship to the company? What relations of power between investor and startup, founder and employee, are produced through such cohabitation and workspaces?

The experience of feeling alienated, the opposite of which I am examining in this chapter, has to be understood separately from the theory of alienation articulated in Marxist scholarship. I follow Moishe Postone (1993) and others in my understanding of alienation as having two different meanings, even within Marx's own body of work: a humanistic sense of *feeling* alienated from one's work, and alienation as the abstraction of all labor that is a condition of capitalist production and capitalist social relations. The former concept of alienation is inadequate, and even problematic, for a critique of capitalism (see, for example, Weeks 2011 for a

breakdown of the problematic logical conclusions of this humanstic Marxism), but that does not mean it does not exist culturally, as an affective, embodied experience, outside of these academic conversations. My usage of the word *alienation* in this chapter is referring to the humanistic idea as it exists in American capitalist culture, the experience of feeling alien or of making something foreign within oneself or one's work. Others have called this process subjectivation as workers. To me, analyzing how identification with one's work is produced through space and calling this process a making of an unalienated experience of work does not necessarily assume a transhistorical concept of labor in my critique of capitalism. Quite the opposite, in this dissertation, I am interested in how *feeling unalienated* through the reorganization and resignification of work, an expectation in neoliberal capitalism, furthers capitalist production, which can be understood as a system of alienation through abstraction of the value form. Alienation is a condition of all capitalist relations, regardless of whether or not subjects feel alienated, but those feelings matter. Indeed, they are the product of much of tech startup culture specifically and entrepreneurial culture more generally. My research investigates the difference the absence of feeling alienated makes, and how it is generated, in startups, particularly for financialized forms of value.

During my fieldwork, I conducted research at five startup workplaces, including two where work was also home, two corporate office parks, and four personal homes that were not formally double as workspaces. I also participated as a mostly silent observer in one distributed or virtual startup workplace by joining their

company slack and attending virtual meetings. While my insights in this chapter draw on all of these sites, I highlight two sites in particular that exemplify different moments in the lifecycle of technology startups: an early-stage startup housed in an "incubator" and a more mature startup with an office separate from employee homes.

Although it sometimes can be exhilarating or comforting, the startup-style integration of office and home, with its blurring of distinctions and references between spaces of work and life, facilitates the investment of the laboring subject into startups by creating a space that accommodates constant availability for work. This condition has been described elsewhere as "presence-bleed" or a state in which "Communication platforms and devices allow work to invade spaces and times that were once less susceptible to its presence" and the experience of "the location and time of work become secondary considerations to the task of managing the expectation and/or the possibility that one is able and willing to work" (Gregg 2011, 2). The presence-bleed intensified by the spatial arrangements of startups reflect the web of financialized relations between startup workers, the company, and its investors. It has become an industry standard for technology companies, both startups and large corporations, to offer stock as a form of compensation, and this is not without consequences. As this chapter shows, this change in form amounts to more than a speculative dollar amount: it reconfigures the relationship between worker and company in ways that are reinforced and disciplined through the intimate, domesticated spaces of work itself.

House and Home

Startup workplaces, even when located in more traditional commercial spaces and sprawling suburban office campuses, have been at the forefront not only in reimagining work, but in experimenting with transforming the physical layouts, amenities, and schedules of office work to approximate home. Work from home and telecommute arrangements further draw non-office spaces like homes and cafes into constellations of dispersed workspaces. And because many startups operate without offices, most succinctly characterized in the ideal of a scrappy agile startup operating out of a garage, startups blur, spatially, socially, and financially the boundaries between home and work spaces.

Anthropologists have long stressed the importance of houses, their role in cultivating social relatedness, and the historical meaning of the home in capitalist societies. In addition to being physical spaces of dwelling, houses and homes structure everyday embodied practices and conceptual schemas through their architecture, and serve as utopian spaces of unalienated activity associated with the family. Throughout anthropological literature, houses have always been more than mere physical structures for the everyday necessities of shelter and food. Houses are a means of arranging, crystallizing, and negotiating various forms of kinship; creating corporate bodies through the sharing of goods, heirlooms, and space; and/or creating meaningful lineages through the transmission of a name (Levi-Strauss 1984). Houses also actively produce forms of sociality, including notions of difference and hierarchy, through both metaphorical manifestations and the shaping of praxis. Pierre

Bourdieu understood the house as "the principal locus for the objectification of generative schemes" (1977, 89). Through the everyday practices of inhabiting a house, bodies incorporate categories and hierarchies that order social life, which are reified in the house itself.

Houses organize our sense of personhood and relatedness as they organize our bodies in space. It is this intimate relationship to the body as a pattern for everyday practices that makes the house a particularly fruitful site for social analysis. As Carsten and Hugh-Jones argue, the sedimented meanings of its space resonate in how we experience and make sense of the world: "Intimately linked both physically and conceptually, the body and the house are the loci for dense webs of signification and affect and serve as basic cognitive models used to structure, think and experience the world" (1995, 3). Perhaps for this reason, cohabitation arrangements are often the subject of utopian experiments designed to reorder all of social life, such as the Soviet communal apartments that were intended to defamiliarize the family through scientifically rationed collective living (Boym 1994).

Furthermore, home has a particular meaning in capitalist society as the dichotomous other-space to work. Drawing on interviews conducted in 1960s Chicago, Schneider summarizes the beliefs of his informants as follows:

> [A] family lives together, and where it lives is 'home.'... To 'feel at home' is opposed to all other states, which imply a sense of being alien. One can hire a housekeeper, a person who manages different tasks of keeping house, but a home-maker makes a house into a home

41

and no amount of money (it is said) can buy this. One of the most

fundamental and yet specific ways in which kinship is distinguished

from all other kinds of relations is in the physical separation of work

and home (1968, 45).

Schneider sets up a familiar dichotomy: home is what work is not. For the

waged worker in American culture, according to Schneider's schema, work is

experienced as the place and sense of being alien, whereas home and feeling at home

is not. This reflects the economic categorization of work as productive and home as

reproductive. In American culture, home and workspaces in particular have deeply

entrenched meanings that shape not just the activities that take place there, but how

they are experienced and economically valued, or in the case of unwaged domestic

work, not valued. Another way of saying this is that work and home, like kinship and

economy (Strathern 1985), are symbolically mutually-constituting and mutually-

excluding spaces and activities.

Of course, this cultural meaning of home—which is distinct from the practices

and economic relations that the meaning obscures and enables—has a history.

Historians of the United States have demonstrated that the ideology of work and

home as separate public and private spheres was the product of political, economic,

and cultural developments in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries

(Kessler-Harris 1982; Cowan 1983). Feminist anthropologists and political theorists

also discuss the making of public and private as an outcome of Western Victorian

ideological production, often actively enforced on colonized populations more than

transhistorical truths of the human condition (for critiques of public/private dichotomies as well as analyses of their colonial formations, see Rosaldo and Lamphere 1974; Collier and Yanagisako 1987; Chatterjee 1993; Comaroff and Comaroff 1997; Stoler 2002). Historians of the United States find that from settler colonization well into the nineteenth century, domestic production was economically valued and culturally esteemed in the U.S. as a part of Jeffersonian yeomanship and a frontier imaginary; the rise of national republicanism and industrialization gradually led the household to become sentimentalized, divested of its formal economic relation and morally opposed to the market (Cowan 1983). While there was a sexual division of labor during the domestic subsistence economy (for example, men were responsible for grinding grains for flour that women would bake into bread), industrialization reorganized gender roles vis a vis work by shifting formal waged work into factories, excluding the households as a unit of formal economic production (informally included both reproductively and productively through putting-out systems of work), and increasing the labor of achieving bourgeois domesticity within the home.

This increase in domestic labor seems counterintuitive—labor saving technologies and the transfer of domestic production into market consumption should in theory free up time. However, housework was never just about subsistence but also about the production of U.S. race and class hierarchies (Stoler 2006). During early industrialization, the kinds of domesticity that took considerably more labor, time, and purchasing power became associated with bourgeois whiteness in

contradistinction to racialized lower classes, including Blacks, Native Americans, and the Irish (Cowan 1983, 52).[6] As the commercial economy grew, bourgeois child-rearing gained new significance as well, and "women were recruited to the crucial task of producing the kind of human capital that the modern industrial economy needed" (Crittenden 2001, 51). As anthropologist Wanda Minge-Klevana writes, "During the transition from preindustrial society to industrial society, the family underwent a qualitative change as a labor unit—from one that produced food to one whose primary function was to socialize and educate laborers for an industrial labor market" (1980, 285).[7]

Home took on its modern ideological meaning as the utopian space of sentimentalized relations as a necessary reproductive opposition to the rational, productive relations of the market. As Marx writes, "[T]he worker therefore only feels himself outside his work, and in his work feels outside himself. He is at home when he is not working, and when he is working he is not at home" (1961, 72). Under conditions of capitalist production, home is not merely a space but the mental and affective state of not working. For the Frankfurt school, home was a space of ideal communalistic humanity, where "unlike public life, relationships were not mediated through the market and the individual members were not competing with each other.

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[6] Some anthropologists of colonial history argue that the European bourgeois cult of domesticity actually developed out of the colonial encounter. For an excellent example of this, see Stoler (2002) and Comaroff and Comaroff (1997).
[7] Many scholars observe a similar co-emergence of a sentimentalized domestic ideology with the development of capitalist markets in Europe (Arendt 1958; Habermas 1989).

Consequently the individual always had the possibility there of living not as a mere function but as a human being" (Horkheimer 1972, 114). Although people might perform low-waged or unwaged work at home, it is nonetheless culturally, institutionally, and ideologically understood as a space where alienation does not take place. At one's own home, the work done is work for oneself, reproducing oneself or one's family.

Also to further clarify, what I have outlined is the history of the emergence of an ideal and ideology of home as an unalienated space, which continues to circulate in the world, including the tech startups I conducted fieldwork in, but not necessarily of home as the totality of actual, lived experiences, including working experiences, in spaces of dwelling. The ideal of home, and of public and private, is inextricable from historical practices that, upon examination, actually undermine the idealized dichotomy. For example, the history of domestic work relations, colonial servitude, and slavery both supported the emergence and experience of home as a place of rest for wealthy, white property-owners while excluding colonized and enslaved populations from it (See Stevenson 1997 for an excellent, ethnographic historical account of Black and White domestic life under slavery). However, far from reflecting an oversight, these contradictions are evidence of the pervasive ideological, institutional, and economic importance of home/work dichotomies that persist despite practices to the contrary.

Amongst capitalists themselves, the division between work and home is economically advantageous in another sense. Sylvia Yanagisako's (2002) study of

Italian capitalists also suggests that, like work and home, capital and "western capitalism" cannot be abstracted from historically specific cultural processes of kinship and gender. Theories of capitalism that separate kinship and economy, or economic action from other sentiments and desires, "misconstrue the legal fiction of separation—which was put in place for the purpose of limiting individual and familial financial liability—as a de facto separation of family relations from business relations" (2002, 21–22). The practical material and economic entanglement of work and home in the U.S. does not negate the work/home dichotomy. On the contrary, the persistence of the ideological separation of public/private, home/work, despite the long history of pragmatic muddying of such categories underscores its ideological importance. There is immense cultural labor and many institutions invested in maintaining an ideal separation of home/work, private and public, which raises the question of what work this separation and, in the case of startups, subsequent integration of two culturally distinct spaces does economically.

This history informs the contemporary economic and cultural climate in which working from home is seen as an incredible privilege of working in the age of digital technologies. These tech-enabled spatial reconfigurations of private and public lend new intimacies to work, such as a "presence-bleed" between work-life and non-work life (Gregg 2011). While perceived (pre-COVID) as a luxury or perk, the ability to work from home also individualizes responsibility for work and lead workers to feel emotionally invested in ways they might not have otherwise. During one of my visits to her studio apartment, one informant, Amber kept simultaneously checking her

phone for messages from her team and apologizing for her rudeness. She chastised casually pathologized herself, "I'm such an addict. I just can't turn off." Amber felt individually responsible for maintaining boundaries around work and that her failure to do so in the presence of a house guest demonstrated a personal failing, even though the mobility of her work makes her constant accessibility and responsibility to work both a tacit expectation and the industry norm. This attachment to work, while digitally enabled, also became economically attractive with the rise of new managerial regimes that aimed to recruit the worker through subjectification, made even more compulsive with the financialized contract.

Financialized Contracts Redraw the Map

Technology startups, by virtue of having just started up, have a liquidity problem. They must fundraise to get off the ground. Funding can take place in several rounds: first, a business might search for "seed funding" from "angel investors" to launch a business. These investments are small, typically a few thousand dollars, from individuals. Once a business plan is developed, a company may move to Series A fundraising. The goal of Series A funding is to garner capital to pay employees, hire new employees, perform market research, launch a product, and develop a marketing strategy. A company must already have a proof of concept and demonstrated potential for growth and a sizable valuation to be successful in Series A. Series A investments are typically between $2-15 million. A company can pursue Series B funding after launching its initial products to develop and expand the

company further. In 2019, Series B funding resulted in an average of $32 million per company. Series C is when a company prepares to be acquired or go public (Reiff 2020).

With limited cash flow at the outset, startups offer stock options as compensation to recruit members of the team. This practice is, according to Harvard Business Review, "like offering a lottery ticket in exchange for a lower salary" (Blank 2019). Employees are implicitly promised that if they work hard enough, they can personally change the odds for the future of the company and make their stock options more valuable. Founders and seed or angel investors have different options than new hires, but employees' fates are nonetheless tied through these financial instruments.

In what follows, I closely examine two different workspaces to analyze the relationship between financialized contracts, the value of shares, cohabitation, and domesticity. I also examine how the startup-stylized corporations fulfill and expand on the same dynamic relation between life and capital that is a model for finance capitalism: reshaping reproductive life for the purpose of maximizing value. Although domesticity has historically been tied to financialized work contracts, such as through individual retirement accounts, the new model of stock option compensation that is standard in technology startups relates home and work in new ways.

The Incubator

When I first meet José and Mark, they are getting excited about launching

their next project, but they are still tying up loose ends with other startups they have

been working with. José tells me that Mark is living in a house that I might be

interested in seeing, so we make arrangements to visit. The new startup that José and

Mark will be working on together is brand new, still fundraising (called Series A for

the type of shares given in exchange for investments) and have yet to secure anything

above 5 figures. These small investments are made by "angel investors" or

individuals with capital who occasionally also provide mentoring. As such, their

startup is a distributed workplace, which means their almost all of their work will be

done virtually, with conference call meetings and ongoing project development on

Slack, a messaging platform designed for workplace communication that incorporates

the informality of social media and chat rooms. Jose and Mark, both in their early

30s, were individually recruited from jobs with other established technology

companies to their current startup, where they met. Both are briefly in town, in

Silicon Valley proper, for one of their few in-person gatherings. Without a car of his

own, José asks me to pick him up from a store where he was shopping to visit the

house where Mark is living along with the rest of the startup team. "This is the most

expensive zip code in the country," José tells me, as we drive through a neighborhood

of mansions.

Indeed, Atherton is consistently ranked as the most expensive real estate in the

country and one of, if not the number one, wealthiest communities in the United

States. The neighborhood in which this house is located provides proximity and

49

access to the elite venture capital hub in the nearby town of Menlo Park. Living—and not merely working—in this house gives these startups a status upgrade as well. The wealth of the neighborhood endows prestige to the house and its inhabitants, however temporary, and José's mentioning of it suggests this prestige percolates into associations beyond the immediate members of the startups. Having an Atherton address assures residents of the house that they belong in Silicon Valley, amongst other tech success stories, and next to the power brokers of Sand Hill Road, which runs through Palo Alto, Menlo Park, and Woodside, where the region's biggest venture capital firms are clustered.

Approaching the neighborhood, away from the main roads, I notice that there are no street signs and even fewer sidewalks. It is not a gated community (perhaps a gate would be too gauche, or maybe just unnecessary for a community only accessible by car), but the absence of navigational signage and sidewalks indicate to me that outsiders are not welcome in this archipelago of private estates. This exclusivity contributes to the prestige that startup workers enjoy through association and identification. Claims to self-made beginnings, common in startup stories, never mention the extreme wealth backing such situations. When origin stories of successful tech companies claim to have their beginnings "from the garage," they mean an Atherton, Palo Alto, Menlo Park garage. Intergenerational wealth transfers, whether as angel investors or through the donation of garage space, are almost always hidden in plain sight in these stories.

We pull up a driveway to a yellow mansion, with oak trees framing the yard and providing even more privacy between the house and the public street than the expansive yard itself. Mark, a slim and short white man in his early 30s with shoulder-length hair and a generally relaxed demeanor, meets us at the front door and gives us both hugs. The house, I find out, is an incubator funded by a famous venture capitalist whose identity they are not supposed to disclose, although I suspect insiders in these elite kinships know anyway. Mark explains to me that all the people who stay there are 'fellows' working on different projects.

The funding structures, spatial arrangements, and economy of proximities structure a form of worker subjectivity that departs from earlier formations of home and work described previously. While some incubators in Silicon Valley are run by Stanford University (this is not without controversy), even amongst those funded and run by venture capital firms, incubators adopt the model and language of academia. Accepted applicants are *fellows*, startups that complete the program *graduate*, and are subsequently called *alumnae*. Why maintain cultural resonance with a system that the tech startup world has famously rejected in its glorified narratives of Stanford dropouts? It suggests a funding structure and work life that is tied to anticipated outcomes rather than labor time, and indeed work that is more "life of the mind" than menial labor. Included in the fellowship are early investments in the startups (called "seed funding") in exchange for equity, ongoing mentorship and business plan development (startups might shift course completely once in the program), an existing network of investors, a Silicon Valley address, and unique housing arrangements that

51

accommodate the expectation that one's work is one's life. Accelerators resemble incubators in many ways but act as a next step for already established startups. They offer larger investments for a greater range of equity and continue with mentorship. The Atherton house is an exclusive incubator, which happens to be privately funded by a venture capitalist and invitation-only, but others, such as YCombinator, have broad name recognition and receive thousands of applications every year.

These residency programs are different than so-called startup houses or "hacker hostels," which are run more like dormitories than apartments: they rent out bunkbeds on Airbnb to entrepreneurs often screened by a "captain," almost always a woman, who also performs occasional reproductive labor, like cooking them breakfast. One place that I researched in San Francisco has a dorm area with bunkbeds upstairs and a coworking space downstairs. In the upstairs area, there is no personal privacy except a small corner for women (the spatial ratio clearly reflecting a disproportionate gender ratio) to sleep and change in that is only identifiable as such by a thin, rice paper wall. Most of these startup houses offer vague promises of cross-pollination, networking opportunities, and community in exchange for dorm-like living conditions. The pared-down life-work space is part of the appeal for residents, as is the ability to list one's business address in Silicon Valley for relatively cheap rent. The companies that run hacker hostels reap the benefits of densely packed tenants, where a single bunk may rent upwards of $1,200 (Alba 2015).

Like a shared bedroom in a startup house, shares in a company is meant to motivate through exclusive inclusion a deep personal investment by participants who

in other settings might be identified as employees, but in the startup world are known as members of the team. The rest of Mark's team is currently at a festival (a countercultural inheritance of Silicon Valley tech is that startups and tech companies often encourage participation in festivals, which are days long parties that mix live music, drugs, and networking. Mark had gone the day before and said he "needed a break"). I ask if I can see the rest of the house. Mark obliges enthusiastically. Inside is quite the opposite of what most would consider a life of luxury. The building itself, a stately mansion that once accommodated a wealthy family and undoubtedly domestic staff, is at odds with its contents: details like the moulding on the walls or the antique light fixtures suggest the house's history as a home to a wealthy family. In this multi-million-dollar home, with high ceilings and hardwood floors, the common spaces have been converted into workspaces, with desks, Mac desktops, whiteboards, and paper clutter. In the sunny front room with a wall of windows—in another time, it might have been called "the solarium"—there are two young white men working at a desk. They look up briefly but do not engage. Mark seems unphased by this and I sense no hostility between them. I suspect it is perfectly normal, even expected, to be so engrossed in work that even a brief interruption is not worth the social nicety—or at least, this is an expected performance in front of others in this economy. Mark tells me they are with another startup living in the house, working on developing a drone that follows a person around with a camera. It is a consumer-facing product, but one that undoubtedly has military origins and applications.

The ways in which shared startup houses facilitate and reorganize home-work space both draws on nuclear family associations and departs from bourgeois domesticity in its relation to financial value-generation. Startup workers in incubators often form enduring relationships out of the work reciprocity that comes from living together. They often provide a basis for future friendships and networking opportunities. Houses are, after all, have unique qualities as vehicles of social reproduction, not only for the embodied practices the house shapes but also for the sense of identification and kinship that inhabitants derive from it. Their structure can facilitate and provide a material reflection for the form of intimacy and relatedness between inhabitants. Two other informants who I work with—Martín, a Latinx man from the Central Valley farmworker town of King City, California and Michael, a white middle class man from Atlanta, Georgia—had met each in an incubator and both characterize their relationship as a brotherhood (everyone in the incubator was a man), suggesting that the incubator house experience creates kin-like ties of mutual reciprocity and enduring trust that subvert other social differences as well as competition over power and resources. Oftentimes, incubators involve community, shared guest lectures, regular pitch-practices, collective problem-solving, and experienced entrepreneur investors who act in an advisory role to the startups. These explicit experiments with domestic space also refigure the working relationships that take place within them, endowing them with the affective attachments of family and collaboration. The contractual relatedness, and mediation of life and labor by capital, is more easily accomplished both by the house's erasure of physical separation and by

the financialized nature of the contracts, which infuse motivations even as they disappear into the background of economic life.

The house itself acts as disciplinary instrument, harmonizing social and financial interests through the shared space itself. In the large, open kitchen, black granite countertops and brushed steel appliances suggest recent renovation. Mark explains that the labels on food (of which there is not much) indicate its owner, "so not everything is communal, but almost everything." Upstairs, two people live in each bedroom. Mark does not live in these rooms, but he seems to need no permission to enter them. Once we look inside the bedrooms, I understand why privacy is not a concern. There is very little personalization. There are mattresses on the floors, a setup I observed in several other informants' apartments, but the contrast is more striking here. Other apartments that startup workers called home, such as those of Martín and Michael, still felt lived in and hospitable, if a bit college-like in the lack of concern for appearances and cleanliness (also a sign that the collapse of work and home space might infuse home with work, but that the gendered division of domesticity—who is responsible for making the house a home—remains). But in the Atherton house, there are few signs of personal life. The large bedrooms and high ceilings make floor mattresses covered in plain white and grey unmade bedding and lack of personal belongings seem bleak in comparison. Some of the bedrooms are dark with little sunlight or overhead lighting. There is an occasional note or quote written on computer paper and taped to a wall above the mattress on the floor, and

55

there are almost always sticky notes, the iconic tool of choice for 'innovative'

thinking with its easy adaptability.

Mark shows me outside to the poolhouse. He lives in the poolhouse with his

life partner who also works for both of the same startups as he does, but is not

present. The front half of the poolhouse is for storage. He opens the second door,

explaining, "this is where T and I live." It is a tiny room, the size of a closet, with

books and blankets on the floor. I start to step inside when he extends an arm out to

stop me. "Oh I'm sorry, I should've taken off my shoes," I apologize. Mark answers

with a smile, "No, it's just... you're stepping on my bed." I realize my mistake: his

bed is indistinguishable from the floor because he sleeps on the floor, covered with a

few, thin, rug-like blankets. The room has no mattress and no nightstand. A defunct

desk is being used to store clothing, but clothes are also strewn across the room.

Dozens of sticky notes with writing on them form a kind of collage above the blanket

bed.

Certainly, the Bay Area rental market disciplines subjects to adopt

cohabitation practices regardless of personal preference, and the transitional nature of

the 'fellowships'—typically, they last three months—means they only accommodate

those who want to live without much personal space or many personal belongings.

However, Mark is proud to show me where and how he lives, not ashamed of what

circumstances had led him to accept. His attitude towards hosting me for a house-

office tour, like that of many informants, is one of pride in the collective

circumstances of his house. This suggests there is more sentiment to the story than

necessity: intentionally eschewing conventional domestic comforts and spatially substituting it with work, with no walls between life and work, performs a much lauded always-on work ethic. For entrepreneurs, the joy is supposed to come from immersion in the work itself, because they are working for themselves, to further their own vision. The preference for work immersion and intensification is reflected in the meager ways inhabitants alter their living spaces. They surround themselves with work problems and work ideas, and by living together in this house, work people.

Through the house, they create and inhabit an environment that is always ready for a moment of felicitous problem-solving. The house frames the activities there and the identities of its inhabitants with a purpose: the purpose of making their startup succeed. This also suits the flexible roles startup team members are expected to have in a startup. As one informant reflected on his time in a startup house:

> [I] basically didn't sleep. I lived in this cottage in the backyard. That was my whole life, it was just consuming me, because, like it wasn't just like, trying to [get] merchants under the platform. I was doing recruiting, I was doing syndication, which is like taking our data and spreading it throughout the internet so we get more clout… I was doing all the sales, I was doing everything, I was doing the revenue strategy, so it was a lot of work.… You just do as much as you can.

The startup house is both a reflection and disciplinary technology of shared financial stakes. Do as much as you can, because the company interests and team interest are aligned. Mark, like nearly all my informants, speaks very positively about

his teammates and passionately about his work. He shows no signs of resentment or dissatisfaction with the asceticism he has adopted for the purpose of living the work. As two other informants tell me about living in startup houses, these shared circumstances with teammates make it feel as if they are "in it" together. This can be understood in two ways: as a semiotic means for creating and reflecting cohesion, and as a disciplinary tool for maintaining it. On the one hand, shared risk and the feeling of unalienated work is a result of finance capitalism. When value is tied to the value of the stock, and startup employees are compensated through financial instruments, from an economic standpoint, self-interests are company interests. On the other hand, even if there were work-oppositional sentiments or desires, in a shared house with the constant surveillance of one's team they would have little room to grow. If the wage is a technology of capitalist masculinity, enabling the appearance of an exchange between mutually consenting equals, house and home (which are simultaneously experienced here) are disciplinary technologies of capitalist femininity, transforming hierarchical relationships (like the heterosexual patriarchal marriage) into sentimentalized ones with a common good—and, as I will explore further in the next chapter, reframing reproductive labor into non-work (Fortunati 1995). As the (unequally) shared financial stakes of startup workers supplant the independence and contingent agreements created by the wage, the shared house reframes the relationship among workers and to the work as one of mutualism, passion, and enduring ties.

The Atherton house is an incubator, but the immersive, ascetic conditions I observed there are also typical of startup teams living together and working together at an early stage. People expect this level of work-life integration when working with an early-stage startup, and it is a reason that some of my informants (notably women) working at larger companies give for why they chose not to work in startups. This next case represents a later stage startup, where the office is separate from employees' individual apartments.

The Open Office

SwiftlyAI, a startup I conducted research with in San Francisco, was a more mature startup when I met them. They already completed a series A round of funding for an AI sales product. They had secured enough investments to grow and hire employees who were not part of the original founding team. That said, more mature does not mean they have actually landed on a product. Despite a round of successful fundraising with an original product, upon launching, it flopped. During my fieldwork, they were trying to appease and calm the concerns of investors, in particular, an individual at Benchmark Capital, by somewhat desperately "pivoting" products from AI-driven sales software to AI-driven sales mentorship software. Within a year and a half of starting my fieldwork, they had already failed.

The office is located in SOMA (South of Market), the neighborhood in San Francisco where I ended up spending many fieldwork hours. SOMA has become known as ground zero for the tech company takeover of San Francisco. SOMA and

the Tenderloin were—and, for many people living there, still are—economically depressed neighborhoods, the site of methadone clinics and shelters. These neighborhoods have undergone several waves of gentrification in the last several decades (Solnit 2000). Thousands of non-profits have left the area as they can no longer afford the skyrocketing rent. SOMA and the Tenderloin have been completely transformed over the past decade, particularly since the 2011 Twitter tax break, which the city offered to exempt companies from paying payroll taxes on new jobs created, leading to an influx of tech companies to these neighborhoods: Twitter, Yelp, Square, Dropbox, Pinterest, Uber, and Airbnb, to name just a few. By 2015, tech companies occupied 60% of the office space in SOMA, and no doubt this number has gone up considerably in the past 5 years, especially with the construction of the Salesforce tower, the second tallest building west of the Mississippi River (first if decorative spires are included). The neighborhood is in many ways a typical downtown: dark, grey, concrete-laden, but full of opulence behind the scenes. In the restaurants and the few workplaces that have publicly accessible spaces, like the Twitter courtyard, passers-by can see a glimpse of the abundant wealth accumulated and experienced during the working hours here.

During one of my visits, the Chief Technological Officer (CTO) of SwiftlyAI and another white male programmer are taking a break to eat sandwiches purchased elsewhere. I ask them about where they live. I only get the CTO's answer, because in the process of describing his five-block walk, the two end up discussing how the walk entailed passing numerous people experiencing homelessness. They both express to

60

me that homelessness makes them sad, that they feel for homeless people and sometimes give them leftover food, but notably, they also discussed the best routes to avoid these encounters.

In a sleek grey concrete courtyard adjacent to a Blue Bottle Coffee shop, I find the SwiftlyAI office. It looks indistinguishable from an apartment building. There is a security guard working at the desk of the lobby who greets me. I explain that I am there to visit SwiftlyAI. He waves his hand and I head up. The hallways are empty, polished concrete, and quiet. A Latinx-appearing woman pushing a toddler in a stroller nods and smiles at me as we trade places on the elevator. So people do live here, I suspect. I walk through the quiet hallways to find the apartment number. Amber, a tall blonde, white woman whose self-presentation, from the makeup on her face to her manicured nails, is as polished as the floors, opens the door, hugs me, and lets me in. She is a childhood friend with whom I reconnected during my fieldwork.

She gives me the office tour. It is clearly a converted, recently renovated if not recently built, apartment, a "live-work" space. Like almost all startup offices, the floor plan is open. The walls are white and the floor is concrete. The furniture is all sleek, lucite, metallic, or white, and on-trend, except for one cozy corner with some frumpy couches. She shows me the conference room. It has no windows, no plants either, but is lit with soft, yellow, non-fluorescent lighting that lends an out-of-place bedroom feel to the room. It is just big enough to comfortably fit a table and Herman Miller Aeron chairs. (Ubiquitous in contemporary offices, these black mesh ergonomic chairs are rather unattractive but quite expensive, upwards of $500 each).

The conference room has a closet, a remnant from when it was a bedroom. Amber opens the closet to show me a few items of clothing—not just jackets, but men's clothing, a few shirts and pants—left there by her boss, who is also the founder. Through another door in the conference room is the bathroom. It also maintains an apartment-feeling despite having no windows: there is a flashy vanity with a large circular mirror and Hollywood lights, the kind that are useful for applying makeup. There is a large tub and shower with a glass door, with toiletries on the sides. The entire place is clean, and smells clean, no doubt because of a regular cleaning service. Back in the main room, against a wall of exposed brick is the kitchen area. Amber offers me a drink.

Unlike the Atherton house, the startup team in this case does not live at work. There is enough cash flow that they are expected to live elsewhere. However, the amenities of the workspace that make it more home-like enable workers to stay in place comfortably for longer hours, long enough to not have time to shower at home. Indeed, the toiletries in the bathroom suggest that some workers in this startup do shower at work on occasion. The home-like workplace has become such a signature of startup culture that corporations like Facebook and Google, who pride themselves on maintaining startup-style culture at scale (see Wojcicki 2011), outfit their office parks with live-work furnishings, everyday infrastructure, and ephemera, not to mention interjected amenities like on site massages, nap rooms, salons, and doggy daycare (there have been failed attempts to create on-site childcare). Playful primary colors associated with childhood and the Bauhaus movement abound.

The provision of non-work spaces at work is intended to cultivate contented workers who play where they work, and thereby generate felicitous opportunities for creativity and innovation. Such spatial arrangements and the objects that define them suggest a workplace akin to home and, as my own shared home with a Googler demonstrated to me, a home that is also for work. Companies call their office parks "campuses," reflecting the expectation that, like universities, these office parks can attend to all the needs of their workers. As I suggest with the startup houses, these spaces are not passive backdrops to the work performed there, to the workers' identities, or the value produced—they are actively involved in shaping relationships, desires, and practices around identifying with work towards the end of increased shareholder value.

One worker at SwiftlyAI, Ren, is queer, Filipina, and the only person of color in the office besides me. She is fired before my fieldwork ends. Her firing is ostensibly over poor performance but also, as Amber tells me, "things just got really weird." She broke up with her girlfriend, and began living out of a trailer. When I suggest that Ren might not have been able to afford to live in San Francisco, Amber replies that Ren was very well compensated. Amber considers herself lucky to have found a 400 square foot studio apartment that she could afford in the Marina neighborhood, but seems to believe Ren should not have trouble herself. Nevertheless, the mention of Ren's trailer-living as the basis for no longer fitting in at the startup suggests that, while doing much of one's living at work—from showering to sharing all meals—is acceptable and even expected, maintaining a domestic space

in the form of an apartment is still a requirement for fitting in. Ren's firing also serves as a reminder that while houses and home-like offices may generate sentimentalized communities of mutual reciprocity and even enduring kinships, just like relations based on blood, they can still come to an end. Bonds can be shaped by the expectation of permanence, but whether or not they continue is ultimately contingent on an ongoing commitment, for startup families as with nuclear families (Weston 1997). Also like nuclear families, there are power relations at play that may be forgotten in some moments of intimacy, but that determine who belongs and who does not. The shared risk of financial compensation packages does not mean mutual vulnerability or shared power, and stock options do not protect one from getting fired. However, the home-like surroundings of live-work offices and startup houses alike certainly facilitates these intimate moments and feelings of equality.

The startup workplace also incorporates objects that home-like feelings of happiness, belonging, and non-work "stick" to (Ahmed 2010, 230). The windows are almost floor to ceiling, making the place feel open, sunny, and spacious. In the middle of the room is a row of Mac desktops on a table that has been repurposed from a series of desks, and another long, large table sits a few feet away perpendicular. All of the desk and table chairs are lucite, except for the designated lounge area, where there is a mid-century modern style sofa in the corner with similarly styled chairs, several sticky notes and a whiteboard (always a whiteboard) above it. At 5pm, there are no signs of anyone leaving the office.

Although it is quickly becoming the norm in creative industry companies, the office was not always the space for poetically manifesting collaboration and equality between teams. Whereas the modern home was the site of sentimentality and family, the office emerged as a Taylorized space of white-collar work. In the first half of the twentieth century, offices were places that materialized corporate hierarchies. Menial labor was arranged in "bullpens"—rows of desks occupied mainly by white women working while being overseen by a white male manager, while higher-ranking managers enjoyed offices that looked more like the comfortable upper middle-class living rooms of the time, with art on the wall, a lounge chair, and a bar (Murphy 2006, 35–56; see also Garson 1988). These arrangements produced gender and race through employees' embodied interactions—with machines, with each other, or hidden from visibility.

However, the model of work changed during the 60s, particularly for the technology-based economy of Silicon Valley. In 1968, an industrial designer at Herman Miller named Robert Propst published a manifesto for a new kind of office, which rejected functionalist arrangements in favor of "flexible" "open system" offices, inspired by Norbert Wiener's cybernetic approach to systems (Murphy 2006, 47). In this new regime of "office landscaping" or "open planning," new offices were to "be organized not by hierarchy or department, but through the democratic circulation of information" (2006, 48). This kind of open planning, now standard in startups and former startup technology companies like Google, derives its meaning in contradistinction to the cubicle. Whereas cubicles create individualization and

hierarchy, with a direct correlation between status and access to space and privacy, the lack of differentiated spaces in open offices is meant to reflect a commitment to communalism and egalitarianism. These ways of structuring space also, in theory, structure the affective experiences of work performed there. If, as Gaston Bachelard writes, the house is a "topography of our intimate being" (1994, xxxvi), the "intimate being" reflected in the open concept office is one who not only feels at home at work, but feels their labor contributes to the collective to which they belong.

This is the myth of the open office, at least. And it is a myth that conceals significant dissonance that is distributed along lines of socioeconomic privilege. Women, for one, regularly report discomfort with open offices, primarily because of a feeling that they are constantly being watched by men (Hirst and Schwabenland 2018). I certainly observed this at work. Amber preferred to eat lunch alone or with me instead of her mostly male coworkers. She also explicitly complained about always needing to have a fresh manicure because her boss had mentioned to her that he judged women by their nails when interviewing them. Racial performances were also intensified by the open office. Martín, the Latinx freelance programmer and angel investor mentioned above, also preferred to work from home where he lived with three other Latinx tech workers. He did not explicitly say that this was due to racism at work, but said that it was more comfortable to not have to perform for others. In talking about his interactions and encounters at work (not necessarily with coworkers but with people in their broader network who would make appearances), Martín would criticize other people of color for being "Carltons," a reference to a

character in *The Fresh Prince of Bel Air* that was designed to showcase the undignified aspiration to fit in with upper-class white society as a person of color. Martín distinguished the "Carlton" performances of some of his peers from mere code-switching, which he found normal and acceptable. These gendered and racial distributions of labor—altering one's appearance or behavior to be more acceptable to other white men in the office— reveal an implicit politics of visibility in the open office. It is an office ideal which actually creates an additional mandate to act as if one feels comfortable there. Belonging is contingent on the performance of belonging.

Murphy attributes the success of the open office not to its democratic ideals or cybernetic communication theory but to its spatial efficiency (2006, 52). Simply put, more workers require less space when they share one long desk instead of separately furnished cubicles. I suspect that it was because this spatial efficiency and collapse of personal boundaries happened to also perfectly metaphorize the work ideals of Silicon Valley that emerged in the 60s-80s, the cybernetic ideals of transparent and frictionless communication and collaboration, that the open office quickly became a popular default.

The reality I observed involved the material contingencies of high rents, the belief in Silicon Valley's culture of meritocratic ideals and subjective involvement in work, and the need to demonstrate and perform to oneself and to investors evidence of accomplishing innovation. Open offices are disciplinary technologies, intended to provide a material metaphor for the psychic relatedness of the worker to the company,

but they are also performances in themselves. After a few major successes—namely Google in 2005—set the precedent for open office workspaces, the open office became a means of signaling to investors that a startup is doing something innovative and interesting. Open offices and the aesthetics of post-industrial comfort (polished concrete, exposed brick, mid-century modern furnishings) were indices of innovation for the series B startup as much as ascetic co-living was of the incubating startup. The volume of investment in a company and its valuation both depend on its ability to appear innovative. It did not matter that Immediately now lacked a coherent product. If they looked the part, investors might continue to believe they were capable of developing a successfully innovative product, and they might believe it too.

Taking Stock

Startups are by no means the first economic units to collapse work-life distinctions by framing work in reference to family structures (I explore connections to family firms and intentional communities in Chapter 4), but their spatial and economic approach to work-life integration is historically specific to contemporary finance capitalism, in which startups are tied more to their valuation than their current revenue and profitability and employees are compensated with stock options. As anthropologists know, economic practices are never merely economic. Circulation and distribution articulate boundaries to a community and create relationships between communities (Munn 1986; Cattelino 2008).

Financialized contracts that offer stock options in place of a higher salary change the nature of the relationship between the worker and work from one ideal of mutually disinterested parties entering into a clean exchange to one of mutual investment and shared risk. The spatial reframing of the startup through domesticated environments that lack privacy does not only reflect the collapse of public and private through stock option compensation in which personal wealth is tied to company value, it also disciplines —sentiments, desires, pleasures, and endurances/commitments—to maximize financial value. The spaces of technology startups, from startup houses to live-work accommodating offices, are reflections of the new employment contract but they are also technologies for maximizing the production of value in a company. Domesticated spaces make it normal, even expected, to make work and life co-extensive. Ultimately, the braiding of work and domesticity creates an affective analogy to home and the expansion of work-time that produces a feedback loop for the investments—financial, temporal, and energetic—of workers in the company. By spatially substituting domesticity with startup workspace, these home-work spaces create material conditions that reshape everyday life rhythms in, through, and for the production of value.

CHAPTER 3

From 10xers to Carrot Choppers:

Food, Creativity, and Value in Technology Companies

In line at the entrance to the Googleplex in Mountain View, California, I turn to my friend and housemate Nigel, who works there and say, "Well, this is amazing." He shrugs. I sign in at the entrance security and have a personal badge printed out, as all outside visitors to Google do. Nigel leads me into the catered eating area. We are meeting for lunch. We wander the rows of options, taking in different catering selections provided by people wearing chef hats, who occasionally smile at passersby as they chop, sizzle, and simmer food. I feel too overwhelmed with options. Nigel, who has worked at Google for years, comments, "all the choices are good. You can't go wrong." Taking my tray up to a zone serving Indian food, I am pleased that, unlike many lunch buffets, my food can be spiced according to my taste, like a restaurant. When Nigel leads me to a table, I ask where I need to pay. "Pay?" He smiles and shakes his head no, amused at my naivete, "This is Google. We can eat what we want, when we want." Thinking about food, the bill, trash, or other details, is a distraction for others to handle—the others who also work for Google as subcontractors but are not included in his use of the word *we*. Nigel's job in his words is to "optimize data analysis to tailor advertising." He works on surveillance and prediction of user taste to improve ad targeting, measured by the click-through ratios of ads (the ratio of displays to clicks). Taste, highly personalized and yet rich with socioeconomic

location, group belonging, and subject-making, is part and parcel of how he makes value at Google.

It is well known that technology companies in the Silicon Valley region invest heavily in their employees' experience of food. Some corporations, such as Google, create entire departments, the Google Innovation Lab for Food Experiences, contracting with various researchers (including anthropologists) to study their workers' consumption practices to constantly tweak the company's subcontracted catering experiences. Others such as Airbnb, Dropbox, and Facebook, are among other former startup technology companies that micromanage food offerings through in-house food programs, as opposed to third-party catering. Food at these tech companies are hyper-engineered experiences down to the design of the tables and chairs, time spent waiting in line (just long enough to meet new people, any longer is a waste of time), plate sizes, and the order of presentation of dishes, which are made by star chefs poached from the world of fine dining. In Facebook's case, the provision of on-site, high quality, free food is zealously protected even against local municipal efforts to force them to support the local restaurant economy.

When I first started conducting my fieldwork, I did not intentionally pursue food as a subject. I thought of free lunch as merely one of the many lifestyle perks offered at later stage successful startups and technology companies aimed at building media hype and recruiting new employees. However, with nearly every casual interaction during my research, comments and discussions about food were an unsought, unsolicited, recurring subject: when startup workers talked about their

workflow, they talked about eating, and when larger company workers talked about their workplaces, they talked about the food. The free lunches served at later stage tech companies was in stark contrast to early-stage startup workers, who also commented on their food choices if only to perform that they were efficiently self-managed. Clearly important to workers and employers alike, food—what people eat, how it tastes, and the simultaneous activities taking place (or not) while eating— was doing something more in these encounters than simply creating media spectacle and facilitating recruitment.

Silicon Valley companies are constantly innovating work-life integration schemas in the design of corporate workplaces and experimenting with new personnel policies in ways that reveal a strategy of incorporating all value-added time. According to the anthropologists Google contracted to research and study and improve its own efforts, companies are investing in "corporate care," or "workplace and worker-generated practices that attend to the needs of the whole worker— fostering a healthy body, an agile mind, and a supportive community" (English-Lueck and Avery 2014, 36). Far from a straightforward caloric reproduction of labor power, food and the experience of eating are powerful sites through which workers negotiate the value of their work, and how companies constitute their own value and prestige.

Whereas the previous chapter examined the performance of financial value through the spatial reconfigurations of startups, this chapter explores how the financial and digital conditions of tech production take place through multiple scales of imagined impact, soft skilled performances, and the perception of microscopic

edges of creativity and innovation. These multiple, overlapping, imagined ways of amplifying or enhancing performance vis-à-vis the constitution of value hierarchies themselves complicate pre-financialized economic models of understanding class, reproduction, and labor. In the era of billion-dollar valuations of companies whose entire business model is contingent on rapidly scalable and ever-changing information infrastructure, the sense of urgency to innovate, and a new immediacy between cognitive labors, public perceptions, and stock value, how do experimentations with food contribute to scales of valuation?

The relationship between food and the financialized analytic framework might feel slippery to readers. I will try to remain as concrete as possible, but it is worth noting that a sense of slippage might also be a result of the nature of financialized economies themselves. As "economies of appearances," where performance is "simultaneously economic performance and dramatic performance" (Tsing 2011, 57). Perceptions, of the workers themselves, within markets, and between companies, is financial performance, and performances are both indices and conjurers of perceptions. Both are directly tied to value production in financialized economies.

I discuss how companies' and workers' experimentations with food are a reflection of and engagement with what the production of value entails in a venture-capital economy, prestigious for creativity and innovation, facilitated by what are perceived to be minute-to-minute competitive edges—and what implications this has for producing hierarchical categories of labor and value. When the performance of creativity and innovation is an industry's identifying commodity in the sense that it is

an index of a company's financial value, managerial regimes (including self-management) become oriented toward producing everyday practices, environments, and subjects, in relation to the exclusion of other subjects. Altering production capacity through consumption, both food and drugs, is only one site for maximizing potential for creativity and innovation, but as I show, it is an important one.

First, I consider the recent capitalist history of lunch and the measurement of calories themselves to demonstrate how lunch, and the reproduction of laboring subjects through food more broadly, has been a crucial node in the circuit of value production since the beginnings of industrialization. Second, informed by feminist approaches to the study of capitalism, I consider how new forms of food reframe the reproductive activity of eating, not only in service of any kind of general work but in service of purportedly cognitive, creative work, defined as particular in its co-production of selves that love their work. From the hyper-mundane meal replacement bars to the ever-changing, obsessively curated lunch menus, I connect this reframing to two changes coming out of Silicon Valley culture. The productivist impulse to view all reproduction as assisting in work leads some to highly value reproductive labor as a commodity for purchase. However, those same conditions lead others to view reproduction as a meaningless chore that ought to be commodified and exploited. On the one hand, the promotion of pre-made meals or meal replacements branded for cognitive laboring subjects illustrates "the reproduction of labor as a meaningless-chore" approach to food by regarding it as a pure energy supply that can be reducible to its minimum function. On the other hand, high quality, elaborately

74

catered meals provided free of charge, as described in the introduction of this chapter, are increasingly common on tech company campuses.

How these two extremes coincide in Silicon Valley technology culture offers a crucial site with which to theorize the postfordist "economization" (Murphy 2017) of reproduction and reproductive labor amidst changes in the quality of labor itself. Temporal structural contours of the economy—the quarterly financial metric, the fast pace of digital innovation— are reflected and produced through seemingly individual food choices. In the economic world in which creativity is value, there are 2 distinct modes. Freedom from food, and freedom to enjoy a creativity-enhancing experience of food. Both of these modalities facilitate recruitment of the worker, in both the individual affective sense and the sense of attracting a workforce. These structural and everyday changes hyper-emphasize a value hierarchy of cognitive performance over reproductive labor, making the labor less valuable, but also in ways that are supposed to make workers feel okay about investing less of their own time in the reproduction of their labor power.

Lunch Break

The midday meal we call lunch has historically been tied to a society's mode of production. In many agricultural societies, the midday meal is often the main meal of the day. Because the workday begins with or before sunrise, workers get up early, eat a light breakfast or nothing at all, work all morning, and finally come home midday to have the main or only meal of the day with family (see Elias 2014).

75

Evening meals, if they happen at all, are much lighter. The early start to the agricultural workday is the origin of the long, leisurely, and substantial midday meals for which southern Europe is still famous: when the afternoon is hottest, it is better to eat and rest than to work outdoors. Furthermore, in 18-19th century kitchens, most food was still cooked on the hearth rather than in enclosed stoves, preparing food was time consuming, and breakfast and supper were often merely leftovers from the midday meal (Gordon 2016, 41–42). In 18th century U.S., this substantial midday meal, then called "dinner", was common among agricultural and workshop workers, and seen as more important than breakfast or an evening meal. The word "lunch" referred to a temporally unmarked snack, "as much food as one's hand can hold," to stave off hunger until midday dinner (Johnson 1755; quoted in Twilley 2012).

Industrialization transformed the meaning of "lunch" from an unimportant snack to the institutionally recognized workday meal that it represents today. In mid-19th century, many people work moved from the home and workshop to a factory or office. Returning home for long lunches was simply impractical for factory and office workers, who remained at work for long stretches of the day. This gave rise to the packed cold lunch, typically prepared by working- and middle-class wives, to be eaten in a hurry, and with less hearty substance at that, because there is no opportunity to take a nap afterwards (see Carroll 2013). First in urban areas and then a national phenomenon, lunch became the meal shared with coworkers in the quickest way possible in order to get back to work. For example, in England's factories in the early 19th century, lunch was most often a hot cup of tea with plenty of sugar,

sometimes with some bread and jam—cheap, instant calories that required next to no cooking (Mintz 1985, 182). Industrial production transformed the midday meal into a marked functional feeding time, rather than a meal that merited the time, pleasure, or satisfaction that it once got. As Abigail Carroll writes, "For the majority of Americans, the new midday meal was no sacred family ritual; it was a practical solution to problems associated with the new approach to business. Inherently flexible, it simultaneously accommodated the demands of the stomach and the increasingly regimented stipulations of work" (2013, 56).

This transformation of lunch is indicative of how food, as a means of reproducing the workforce, was and continues to be a medium for also managing and controlling that workforce. In Marxist analysis, this appears in the process of the valorization of capital. Valorization, or the circuit of production of value, takes place both through the investment of constant capital as the means of production (technology and raw materials) and variable capital, or wages for the means of subsistence, "which have to be consumed to reproduce the muscles, nerves, bones and brains of existing workers, and to bring new workers into existence" (Marx 1990, 717). The function of food as a managerial medium also overdetermined technoscientific innovations for new ways of seeing and measuring food. With the invention of the calorimeter in 1896, the calorie also became a governing metric for framing the consumption of food into units of energy. Calories made food not merely a political object but also an economically legible object that could be finely calibrated to discipline populations, ready them for war, and even cultivate sympathy

in one population for other war-stricken parts of the world through distributed deprivation (see Seikaly 2016, 77–102). Simply put, hungry workers strike, so these new metrics of food proved useful for calculating the minimum cost of reproducing a labor force in the sense of the daily reproduction of their labor power.

But the entanglement of food and value produced through work is about more than a caloric calibration for maximizing productivity at minimum cost. What and how workers eat are socially creative acts, reproducing and reinforcing social stratifications. When factory cafeterias cropped up as a cost-saving solution to lunch counters and outside breaks, separate rooms were provided for men and women, and where both were employed, for blacks and whites. As working-class laborers, including women working in factories and in other people's homes, took brief, frugal lunches, even for those who could afford to eat a leisurely meal, lunch was kept light: middling white collar workers ate lighter fare such as sandwiches (still prepared by the unpaid labor of middle-class housewives), so as to leave them less "foggy and fatigued" (quote from Carroll 2013, 59)—reflecting a fixation on the management of cognitive focus that many technology workers today would recognize. Upper-class notions of gender formed in relation to the midday meal, which was, for middle- and upper-class housewives, the only meal free of husbands. In the 1950s, newly invented Tupperware parties facilitated middle class women's capacity to save labor and share with friends while maintaining the values of "home cooked meals," (Clarke 1999). Meanwhile, for the capitalist class, lunch as an indulgent social affair became an important identity- and value-producing ritual. Elite business lunches were

"prolonged, copious, and taken in great comfort" (Elias 2014, 26), and elite lunch

clubs were often the site for exchanging ideas, developing professional networks, and

cutting deals. These considerations demonstrate that lunch—who ate what, where,

and with whom—has served not only to produce race, class, and gender hierarchies,

but also a hierarchy of the value between the supposed immaterial labor of the

managerial and capitalist class, whose ideas deserve to be nourished and shared, and

the material labor of factory workers.

Engendering Value

The act of differentiating and establishing a value hierarchy between

immaterial, cognitive labor and material labor has perhaps never been more important

to production itself than in the supposedly creativity- and innovation- driven economy

of Silicon Valley. At one time, every Apple charging cord, box, and device read

"Designed in California | Assembled in China." The distinction between who designs

and who assembles, and between the labors entailed by both, is constitutive of what

makes these local players in the tech economy worth their wealth, to themselves and

others. Some scholars of capitalism have made the argument that there is a material

difference between affective (or "immaterial") and other forms of labor. Hardt and

Negri's (2004) characterization of the changes taking place in the nature of capital

itself after the collapse of Fordism relies on the reality of distinct productive forces,

of capital moving the site of production from the factory to society itself. Others such

as Rofel and Yanagisako argue that the distinction of immaterial to material labors is

less a pre-existing objective condition but rather "an ideological distinction that is actively made in encounters along with hierarchies of value and forms of inequality" (2019, 101; see also S. Yanagisako 2012). This hierarchy of immaterial and material builds on capitalist racialized and gendered hierarchies of value.

The differentiation and hierarchy of production over reproduction demonstrates how value is inherently gendered. But this is not a chapter about the obvious gender and race discrepancies between who makes food and who consumes it, or how men and women experience and utilize lunch breaks differently in Silicon Valley. Instead, the chapter approaches creative and reproductive labor through this feminist lens in order to identify how emergent modalities of capitalism—namely, quarterly metrics and shareholder value— generate new norms about creativity as value production and manual labor as reproduction. Food and consumption practices intensify existing hierarchies of labor, enabling the further differentiation and valuation of creative cognitive labor over other forms of supposedly non-creative labor. Food practices also reflect an obscured relationship between performance and value while also maintaining the certainty of this relationship by mediating between oneself as an embodied subject and the financial performances of one's company. In other words, companies and their workers might not know exactly how eating new foods every day impacts performance, but the cultural and regional insistence that it does reinforces the perception, and thus reality, of this link.

The feminist theory of capitalism is not simply about what sort of gendered bodies are doing what labor but about the way value in capitalism is itself implicitly

gendered, in that it depends on the mobilization of what gets constituted as *nonwork* in this set of hierarchical value oppositions. Thus, it is not just that money in itself creates abstract labor, but that as a measure of labor-power it produces a boundary between labor-power that can be sold for a wage and that seemingly naturally-occurring reproduction of labor-power. Value producing activities appear extra-economic because they take place "naturally"—as a product of the naturalization of gender: childcare, cooking, sex, and cleaning. But reproduction also refers to activities involved in reproducing a social order. Feminization in these terms is not a process of the making-female of labor markets (more women in a position) but the progressive rendering of more value-producing work as non-work, "with *no limit of time… for an indeterminate time both in relation to the single working day and to the span of her working days, which coincides with her natural life*" (Fortunati 1995, 40, emphasis in original). In other words, as more of the postindustrial economy, especially after the shareholder revolution that transformed the employment relation, transforms more laboring positions into the position of the "domesticated woman," feminist theory resonates with more people. In other words, the insights of feminist theory about reproduction captures the experiences of an ever-greater number of people, of any gender.

The temporality of production for startups, and arguably all post-industrial production, has been radically changed by the rise of the measurement of short-term financial performance. "Shareholder value," a term introduced by US management consultants in the 1980s, produced and reflected the increased attention and visibility,

and speculative profitability, for quarterly financial gains. The shareholder revolution also reconceptualized and transformed the production circuit for many industries. This had real impacts on the management of workers. With the rise of financial value, the notion of "human capital" draws a new equivalence between labor and capital. This shift is reflected in the replacement of the language of *productivity* to a language of *performance*—a regime of optics emerges not merely in the macro-view of performances on the stock market but also through the everyday evaluation of employees (see Chong 2018). This "financial gaze" (Martin 2002, 11) is both facilitated and intensified by the technological developments of Silicon Valley that are most widespread and normalized in startups which render everyday life as quantifiable data and data analysis in new ways. The immersion of life into financial terms is justifiable for the life promised just around the corner for employees— companies can grow and succeed more rapidly than ever, and they can fail equally fast. What distinguishes a success from failure is not clear or known on a day-to-day basis, enabling the expansion of uncertainty as a permanent temporality and lived experience.

What is the impact of these new forms of production on lunch, and conversely, how is lunch part of the process of creating new forms of production? Many have observed how late capitalist (particularly digital) forms of accumulation blur boundaries between productive and reproductive time; it also transforms time from productive and reproductive time into productive and potentially-productive time (see, e.g., Ross 2009). Andrew Ross' (2004) research on "no-collar" workers

finds that companies now recognize the benefits of providing for life at and through work, especially to recruit what were once work-oppositional tendencies and desires for creative autonomy that actually suit the needs of postindustrial production. Ross points out that the traditional profile of the artist or academic is ideal for the new kind of worker required by postindustrial jobs: adaptable to change, attitudinally geared toward work, oriented toward the completion of projects as opposed to punchcards, self-managing, and accustomed to a casual work environment. Ross writes, "In the realm of no-collar work, the goal is to extract value from any waking moment of an employee's day. In return for ceding freedom of movement to employees along with control over their work schedule, a no-collar company exercised the right to collect returns from areas of their lives that lie far beyond the physical workplace" (2004, 146).

Food practices are an index of a very real difference in this form of capitalist production, one contingent on supposedly cutting-edge creativity and innovation that renders all time potentially value-producing time. However, they are also involved in the process of reaffirming a hierarchy of the value of this labor over other types of labor. These historical trends also intersect in another way: the prestige of creative labor is traded for the feminization of that labor. The creative worker has the same position vis-à-vis their job as the housewife is expected to—subjectively engrossed, occurring as if naturally as an extension of who she is (as her LinkedIn profile is carefully edited to demonstrate); her work is love, not work. This changes time and the management of the body too.

Mealsquares and Amphetamines: Abstracting the Self

The necessity to eat is a hard limit, but the pressure to optimize one's cognitive laboring output is experimenting with this limit in new ways. The commodified meal replacement products examined in this section are not actually replacing food (much as their branding might promise), but rather to reduce the temporal inflexibility of hunger and subdue food's temporal, sensory, and affective components. Furthermore, born out of the demand for maximum cognitive labor power, they also highlight the invisible creative and cognitive work of reproduction that is made incompatible with programming work.

In April 2017, I was invited to attend a celebratory and brainstorming dinner for the very early-stage cryptocurrency startup *ReveLedge*. This group only gets together in-person a few times a year, but when they do, they stay in a large estate of one of their "angel investors" in the Santa Cruz Mountains. Some meals are catered or occasionally cooked (only grilling) for them by the investor himself, and the grocery shopping is provided by a domestic worker employed by the investor. We are outside chatting around the grill having drinks and enjoying the view of the redwood forest. I strike up a conversation with one member about a recent very publicly launched DAO (another type of crypto coin technology, mostly to signal that I can appreciate the type of work they do) and explain that I am an anthropologist interested in studying the production side of crypto, including the everyday lives of people working in the startups behind them. He pulls out a cellophane package and

inside is something that looks like hostess-cake sized square granola bar. "Do you want to try a MealSquare? It's in beta mode, but it's supposed to be a complete replacement for food." We are at a dinner party, about to eat a meal made from fresh produce and pricey seafood, but I suspect my interest makes him want to perform aspects of his lifestyle out of place, including functionally anti-meal choices at a dinner party. On the other hand, he had it in his pocket before knowing I would be there. I try a bite and joke that it tastes like how I imagine rabbit food would taste. He laughs but says he thinks they taste, "not bad, or at least better than the other ones." It is the first and last time I try MealSquares, but not the last time I see startup workers consuming them and other meal replacements.

To me, MealSquares did not seem, in taste or appearance, radically different from a granola bar, which led me to wonder why MealSquares was chosen as a quick calorie of choice for these technologists. The phrase "in beta mode" gives a clue. The MealSquares website flaunts the fact that it was co-founded by a software developer and health researcher, and that the idea came about because both founders are "infected with Silicon Valley memes"—what exactly that means, I could not tell you, except that it aspires to be of and for self-identified techies. Its branding is similar to Soylent, another meal replacement company that came out of the incubator YCombinator. Made of algae oil, soy, beet juice, and other less-recognizable ingredients, Soylent caused controversy when it launched, even *Wired*, the publishing embodiment of a Silicon Valley-ite fanboy (although with more journalistic substance than, say, *TechCrunch*), said it was the epitome of "what's wrong with Silicon

Valley" (Wohlsen 2013). Soylent was the first venture capital-backed food replacement startup. Its founder, a 24-year-old engineer named Rob Rhinehart, says he got tired of worrying about food, cooking, and cleaning dishes, while working to found a technology startup. Inspired by the futuristic food of science fiction, he decided to change his startup product from wireless networking to food-replacement.[8] Built for efficiency, Soylent has "all the essential materials in our food without any of the extra 'stuff'" (Love 2013).

In his reflection on why the "meal-in-a-pill" is the imaginary future of food, Warren Belasco points out that a fascination and mythology around miniaturized foods with concentrated powers dates back to Neolithic times. Beans and seeds, for instance, have "rich symbolism in many societies, for these compact pellets are literally packed with life (nutrients) and the life force (reproduction)" (2000, 254). However, the image of a meal-in-a-pill solution surfaced in the late nineteenth century, coinciding with the period of rapid industrialization, scientific and technological innovations, and changes in everyday social life. Meal capsules appealed to everyone from military food scientists, capitalists concerned with the

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[8] Rhinehart claims the inspirations for Soylent include the iconic food pill from *The Jetsons* and the algae-based food featured in Ursula LeGuin's *The Dispossessed* (Braithwaite 2016). He acknowledges that most people who hear the name will think of the 1973 Charlton Heston film *Soylent Green*, whose eponymous food product, as viewers eventually learn, is made of recycled human remains. But Rhinehart wryly claims the product is named after the novel which inspired the movie—*Make Room! Make Room!* by Harry Harrison—rather than the movie itself. In the novel, Soylent is made of soy and lentils, not people (Heisey 2013).

mobility of cargo workers, masculine utopias of mastery over all carnal appetites, to feminist utopias of freedom from reproductive labor.

Back at the party, dinner is served: fresh grilled salmon, beet and spinach salad, creamy polenta. I ask the startup team members to expand more on what inspired them. One answers, "we're interested in open sourcing finance. People need access to the OS [operating system] of finance." He explains, "finance is a platform like any other platform. People already have many assets that they cannot mobilize or value on the existing platform." They envision themselves building a virtual world in which everyday people could transform their personal lives, including actions, into assets and liabilities. Like many other groups attempting to build localized currencies hoping to design an autonomous path to a better world that requires no overt political struggle or relinquishing of privilege, they imagine the literal financialization of life as an egalitarian economy. I ask, "doesn't that turn all of life into assets?" He replies, "It's the same in primitive societies. They have all these assets in constant movement." This invocation of primitive societies is revealing of their own notions of noble savages where non-capitalist societies are romanticized as utopian organizations that solve all of capitalism's problems. As misguidedly colonial as this self-purported egalitarian vision sounds, it is standard fare in tone, implicit racism, and scale (changing the whole economic system for everyone in the world) for startups, which must constantly conjure spectacular visions of their product in a bid to attract investments.

While satisfying hunger in the simplest and quickest possible way in order to maximize productivity has long been a capitalist practice for increasing productivity, these "tech" branded products massively scale and standardize this practice in a way that affirms the cultural capital, identity, and wellness ethics of the cognitive laboring subject.[9] Soylent and MealSquares' brands, which cater to technologists, are built on the idea of innovating eating in a way that supports postindustrial forms of work. Rhinehart writes, "Being wrapped up in breakfast, lunch, dinner came from an agricultural society and the industrial revolution. We don't work on farms, we don't work on assembly lines and I don't think we should eat like we do" (Braithwaite 2016). The historical inaccuracy is less important than the articulation of a historical narrative that pinpoints meal-replacement practices and products as a means for performing the kind of labor that technologists do. Products promise not only to minimize the labor and time of eating, but also in applying technoscientific expertise to eating, promise to enhance the performance of cognitive labor. Cognitive labor in this understanding is about maximizing mental clarity and focus through food, not merely about saving time and labor. When work is not just a place but a mental state, the ability to achieve "flow," or a state of optimum cognitive clarity and productivity,

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[9] In his autobiography, Benjamin Franklin evinces a sense of moral pride in his light meals, which often consisted of "no more than a bisket or a slice of bread, a handful of raisins or a tart from the pastry-cook's, and a glass of water." This capitalist founding father saw many benefits in this kind of meal: they were cheap enough that he could save money for books, quick enough that they gave him extra time for study, and light enough to lend him "that greater clearness of head and quicker apprehension which usually attend temperance in eating and drinking" (Franklin 1892, 19).

is not a personal experience (Csikszentmihalyi 1990). It is a necessity to perform work in an attention economy.

Working through lunch is more time-efficient, but it is also more "attention efficient," in a world where affective labor and temporal flow dominate in ways that spatial arrangements or bodily exhaustion do elsewhere. A break in attention to work requires an additional labor of re-establishing attention. Cognitive nature of labor changes the form of maintenance. As Goffman writes: "Involvement is a psychobiological process in which the subject becomes at least partly unaware of the direction of his feelings and his cognitive attention. That is what engrossment means. It follows that if a particular focus of attention is to be maintained it cannot be maintained intendedly (at least wholly so), since such an intention would introduce a different focus of attention, that of maintaining a particular one" (Goffman 1974, 346). In tech, coder caves, cavemen, are colloquialisms to refer to programmers who prefer sensory deprivation as their optimal work environment. Hyper efficient meal-replacements with minimalist packaging are precisely for facilitating this environment—a vacuum packed processed plant cube for a sensorial vacuum of an environment.

This is equally true in a work-from-home time regime as it is in the open office format of space so common in Silicon Valley startups. When workers are visible to their coworkers at all times, eating becomes an opportunity to perform one's work ethics. Eating decisions that might signal self-discipline and efficiency do not, therefore, subsume affective experience, but instead convert its performative

powers. These forms of eating are also a means of performing one's discipline and work ethic to investors and oneself. But they are not performing a factory worker's work ethic; in fact, they are explicitly eschewing references to Fordist modes of production by choosing products that emerge from and cite the tech world.

Tino, a Latinx developer, disparages products like MealSquare, but his reasoning reveals a similar practice of leveraging nutrition and calories for the optimization of workflow. I visit him and his roommate Manny, a fellow Latinx freelance developer who also works as a startup mentor and angel investor, at their apartment in Mountain View. He works from home with colleagues, some of whom he also exercises with. They all use the app MyFitnessPal to "track macros," as he says, or macronutrients, and are very committed to an intense regimen of cross-training almost every day. Noticing many bottles of supplements, I ask about their daily regimen.

> Tino: For me, I keep it very simple
>
> Manny: Not for a normal person!
>
> T: I keep it very simple for me. Creatine monohydrate, every athlete should take creatine monohydrate. Glucosamine for joint pain. Deer antler, like, bone stuff, which is good for joint health. A multivitamin. Whey protein around my workouts. I also have it in the morning because this is when I'm really good. So I have a protein shake in the morning, then breakfast, then lunch, then usually I'd work out in the evening, so I have a meal before my workout, then I usually take

aminos BCAAs, and sip on that during my workout, and then after my

workout I will have a protein, carb, and creatine shake. It [creatine]

helps with recovery and it's really good for like, explosive muscle

fibers…. Then ZMA, basically helps put you into a deep sleep. Zinc,

magnesium, A is some kind of vitamin b12 complex thingy.

I take out a bottle of Soylent over for a conversation starter. Picking the bottle

up, Tino looks me in the eye and sternly says, "You should never drink your food.

I'm dead serious. You need to chew. That's the first part of digestion. Don't do this to

yourself. You have to take care of your body—you have to *chew* your food. It's the

first step in absorbing your nutrients. You can't focus if you're not giving your body

what it needs." I recall that he had just said he adds powdered greens and protein to

smoothies and takes supplements every day. I ask what the difference is to him

between these practices and their tech-branded, commodified form. He says,

somewhat defensively, "Yeah, I said I drink the powders but they're supplements, so

I supplement my diet, but I still eat four meals a day. So it's on top of that. It's still

giving my body enough protein to recover and workout appropriately. It's like a boost

in addition to my meals. I still eat."

He proceeds to show me his refrigerator stocked with pre-made meals of "real

food" that he and others buy from the gym—grilled chicken with braised greens and

potatoes, a quinoa salad with tofu, kale and tomatoes. I ask if they taste good. He

replies that the meals "taste fine, and they're exactly what you need… perfectly

balanced macros, full coverage nutrition spectrum, so I don't have to think about it. I

know my body is getting what it needs, and I can just focus." Manny says, "This is more sustainable… the focus here is on performance."

Tino did seem to take pleasure from what he viewed as the optimal management of his body for focus, but like MealSquares and Soylent, there's no emphasis on pleasure in the food itself or interest in preparing it. The food is sufficient and "fine," because the taste of the food is an afterthought to performing and enhancing taste as a signifier of cultural capital. What is important to them is what the food does. While meal replacements and pre-made meal plans purchased at the gym reflect two different approaches to eating, these technologists all adopt an ethic that ties the performance of their work, and ultimately their ability to produce value worthy of their high salaries, to the optimization of their minds and bodies through carefully managed caloric and nutrient consumption.

Tino and Manny tell me more about their daily routines, workflow, coworkers' and other tech contacts' habits, including excessive amphetamine usage.

> Manny: I've never seen a more—a group that abuses more drugs—except for tech bros. Cocaine, adderall, modafinil. It used to be for pilots. They're crazy drug users, like walking pharmacies… tech guys are like, how can I sit and be focused as long as possible, without building real habits.
>
> Tino: Addy!
>
> M: Drug use… it drives the whole valley.
>
> Caroline: How do you know?

M: I interface with a lot more workers than most people, [because I'm] doing freelance. I also have to hunt for new jobs, so I talk to people. Freelancers especially, they like to travel, they're more independent, so if you have three projects and two have deadlines on the same day, what are gonna tell them. [We're] high stress, high output workers under 30.

Manny and Tino see themselves as outsiders in many ways because they've had to prove themselves, unlike some of their class- and race- privileged peers, so they are adept at critical-complicit description of the meritocratic paradigms of the tech world. Engaging in what Holmes and Marcus (2006) would call para-ethnography, they demonstrate the impact of these specific productive pressures on even self-understood outsiders.

M: Like, I've sent [job] candidates to sales guys and [they are] like, "was he a college athlete? Cool." Like, no experience, never interned. But like, he's sociable, he's outgoing, he's fit — and it's always a *he*— and he can deal with rejection. Because he's self-confident. And some of them do very well. Head of bizdev [business development] at Square. College baseball guy, rich guy, no skills. He's my boy, I like him. But he's not skilled. From Pebble Beach. Confidence is their currency. It's tough to access confidence, like at 75% or 80% of your energy. Like wittiness, just like, carrying a room. So if you take the addy, you can go from, if there's 20 people at a party… there's one or

two that are carrying the room, you can go from almost a wallflower to one of the people carrying the room [from adderall]. It goes from like, Thursday at 4 to like, Saturday at 9.

C: So it's enhancing their work.

M: Yeah, and eroding their health. Like, if you count units of work. Like say, a 100 is that max. Like a normal person, or developers— every one talks about developers— say a normal developer sitting 10 to 6 — they never have to come in at 9 — can do 50 units of work. If he takes an adderall at 8am —and these are normal guys, cause there's like, creativity, like the 10xers, cause there's some truth to that—

C: Wait, what's a 10xer?

M: It means that an individual developer contributes 10 times what an average one does, that's cause like, the creativity and scalability of what they do, that's cause their insight has more value across a large product. So your normal guy can do 50 in a day, if he take addy he can do 75. Over 50%.

Quantified understandings of the self—body, attention, types of energies—as an asset go beyond mere caloric regimes to rationalizing (or, for Manny and Tino, not) how drugs can alter the equation. Recalling the history of food rationing, self-rationing practices of technologists extend a disciplinary use of food, consumption, and the consumption of drugs as an economic object through its potential impact on their work performance. With no standard product, no socially necessary labor time, a

rapidly scalable innovation economy, in which value is tied to performances rather than productivity not only reframes all time as potentially value-added time, time that is enhanced by drug usage, it also renders every calorie, nutrient, and pill into an opportunity to either enhance cognitive performance or detract from it. The function of consumption becomes the augmentation of the body and mind to boost performance. Thinking about food in terms of calories set the trajectory for what Tino is personally exercising now: viewing all food as contributing to potential cognitive labor power. Additionally, this frame for food is imbued with an implicit morality. Tino did not reject Soylent because it tasted bad; he chastised me because he believed it was bad for me. The moral good demonstrated by such relations is of optimal health management in pursuit of the greater good of work. The pleasure ought to come from the experience of workflow enabled by optimal health, not the food itself. Food is merely a means to an end, but one that must be (sometimes) chewed.

This discourse of wellness as optimization of the body for work either through carefully managed biological maintenance and/or, as I explore in the next section, exposure to creative combinations (without too much fat or sugar) is, in some ways, a uniquely Californian countercultural movement against a work ethic which might sacrifice the body to work. Although meal replacement might sound like such an ethic, the tech-stylized products and pre-made meals suggest these practices are not about sacrificing or subordinating bodily needs but optimizing it for the more important performance of cognitive work. It also enables bodily management that resonates with these contemporary, masculine actors' sense of self, something that

dieting might threaten by association with women. Furthermore, while the actual process of eating can take place simultaneously with cognitive work, *thinking* about what to eat is a labor that cannot. In some ways, these practices reveal this invisible mental and creative labors of reproduction, if only to outsource it as less important than cognitive work. Crucially, this division of labor maintains a hierarchy of value by excluding those who do the reproductive labor.

Austerity food regimes are clearly not the only kind of food world in Silicon Valley: my first and last MealSquare was presented to me at an opulent dinner party. Instead, the relationship between caloric food austerity and labor is complex, and produces a kind of self in workers that is full of both self-perceived deprivation in service of the "healthy" worker, but also in service of constituting one's labor as cognitive labor. In other words, is it precisely these experimentations that create the category of cognitive labor? That because it is so abstract that it is enhanced by drugs that amplify "soft skills" (Urciuoli 2008) of confidence and attention, and down-regulates hunger (as the basis of non-cognitive labor) that it starts to set itself apart as more valuable and value-producing? The metrics of their labor are not of productivity but of performance. The next section returns to the luxuriously catered lunch as a juxtaposition to the Soylent/takeout work regime. While these contrasting food regimes may seem like opposites, I show how they follow from similar logics of performance and how they produce similar hierarchies of labor and value.

Serving up the Future: "Let the creative juices flow"

Back at the Googleplex with Nigel, I stand up from out of our booth—itself a
seating decision I later find out is also a deliberate choice to encourage creative
conversation— and take a break from our lunch to use the restroom. At the sink, I
note a sign above the usual reminder to wash hands advertising a Google meditation
session called gpause:

Figure 1. Google bathroom poster. Photo taken by Kao

The sign reads:

• deliver awesome presentation

• strongly exceed OKRs [objectives and key results]

• invent the impossible x10

• **allow time to breathe**

• get more done

Lunch, the bathroom break, a 20-minute meditation—these activities are mobilized to orient the body towards important work. Presented in the mundane form of a checklist, it's just ordinary work for a Googler to "invent the impossible x10." It is the conceptualization of the self as a person doing not just meaningful work but creative, world-changing work that makes value and the everyday practice of subordinating one's eating to work confirms to workers that they are embodying important work. These reminders in virtual and physical space of the Google bathroom are affirmations for technologists' labor as important, impossible (for most people), and innovative.

Whereas meal replacements and wellness regimes orient the body and mind towards an optimally laboring self, there is another aspect to this work that meal decisions affirm and produce: that it is creative. Creative selves—those who imagine themselves to be building the impossible, the future, and other such important products—also must ingest cultural capital in order to produce innovation value. If

health and wholeness for the sake of work is embodied in the various regimes of MealSquare and related products that evacuate the lunch hour of mealtime experience, then the opposite does something too. The Silicon Valley belief in the inextricability of food and productivity makes the provision of food the business of companies. Indeed, the physical offices of many technology companies first gained media attention for their robust provision of on-site perks and services for workers. At first glance, the opulent abundance of the company-provided approach to food seems the opposite of the abstraction-austerity approach of startups. However, what this strategy reflects is that the pleasurable experience of eating is not only mobilized towards enhancing the worker to produce value for the company, it also produces the creative self, capable of performing creative work that Silicon Valley prides itself on.

These company food experiences have made a significant impression on their workers. One ongoing informant, Michael, started his own successful consulting business offering "inter-disciplinary domain-expertise" to "optimize ROI [return on investment] across Product, Marketing, Design, and Analytics to achieve Growth." I meet up with Michael for dinner just after he started a new contract with Uber. He prides himself on maintaining a better work-life balance than the typical technologist that, to him, includes socializing with friends over dinners, hosting parties, and making friends at his neighborhood wine bar. But since he started working for Uber, he says he feels "really stressed out. I barely have time to do anything else but work recently." He is disappointed with the way his contract has been handled, that he'd gotten the contract months ago but for some reason, Uber held out on starting him

until the last minute (in regards to the responsibilities and quarterly deadline he was working with for his contracted outcome of an optimized ROI). He also says that the "9-5 expectation—it's not a rule, no one is clocking me in, it is just an expectation— it's tough to get used to. I'm used to flexible hours and working according to projects. But, Caroline, they have *such* good food. Incredible. They offer vegan, vegetarian, pescatarian, meat. Everything. And it's all really good."

Is the high-quality food now a standard of technology companies really only about recruitment and retention, an attempt to dress up the apathetic offices of corporate America to attract young workers wanting more? In his complaint, Michael is saying that Uber is expecting him both to work according to project (meeting an outcome by a quarterly deadline) *and* clocking in minimum physical hours in office. But it seems food successfully counterbalances the pros to his list of cons.

Michael was not alone in his sentiments. At a party in Dolores Park, everyone I speak to either works in tech or are Stanford alums. I meet Tim, who is in a 3-person startup that had just been acquired by Dropbox, a larger, multimillion-dollar company. I ask him how the adjustment is going. He says, "I miss the small scale of things, y'know, scaling up into a company is difficult because things just seem to move slower. It just takes longer to get things done. I miss the intimacy of the original team." But within a few minutes of lamenting this transition, he says, "But y'know, I am really pleased with the perks, like the food. They have fantastic food. Just, every day. Breakfast, lunch, and dinner. And it's all amazing, like so good. It's wild. I mean, it just makes such a big difference, y'know. I'd give up 10% of my salary for

that [laughs]."

Of course, like all-inclusive vacations, Tim probably is subsidizing the perks he perceives as free with some portion of salary. The company calculates that provisioning at work is financially sensible. Still, Tim experiences food as a something that he feels grateful for, as if it were a gift. The experience of high-quality food, given freely as a gift, provides an everyday experience that subdues desires for work to be otherwise. People are indeed thrilled daily by great workplace lunches. The workers I speak to are aware that the free food, like the free wifi on commuter buses, is provided with the intent to capture their time and commitment. As Nigel says of Google, "Sure, the food is great and free if you're willing to stay there all day. But they just want you to stay longer and work longer." Perceived innovative tech companies of Silicon Valley cannot make their employees bring "sad desk lunches," as white-collar employees of other industries, lest they lose "talent" (as desirable employees are called) to other companies.

If the function of recruitment seems simple, the historical and structural shifts that make recruitment such an intensive daily investment is not. Implied in the word *talent*, employees are expected to bring more than mere skills to a job—or rather—the jobs require much more from a person than the compartmentalized knowledge that skills refer to. As Ilana Gershon explains, the self-as-business model, emerging from a disrupted employment contract, means that cultural knowledge, taste, and creativity are equally important skills that actually require much more on the side of subjectification. Whereas a *self-as-property* metaphor, which dominated the 19th and

mid 20th century meant you sold your labor but retain possession of your person. This meant that there was exclusivity, or company loyalty, but also a sharp boundary between work and personal life. When you leave work, you get your "self" back. But the financial restructuring of the 80s not only changed the temporality of companies' production, it also brought about a *self-as-business* metaphor. No longer employees in a subordinate position, workers are implicitly expected to consult with a business as an equal. Gershon writes, "People now think they own themselves as though they are businesses—bundles of skills, assets, qualities, experiences, and relationships, bundles that must be consciously managed and constantly enhanced" (2017, 2). If you own yourself, there is no distinction between work time and personal time. This is not the distant observation of social theory, but a constantly reproduced and reaffirmed reality. When I discuss the self-as-business model of work with one of my informants who works as a recruiter, she replied, "I couldn't agree more," and quoted a talk from Jim Herbold, former SVP sales at Box and the founding team of Box who took them to IPO, "I want someone who sees themselves as the CEO of their own business."[10]

Both the quarterly temporality and the self-as-business metaphor make company loyalty irrelevant and undesirable. Loyalty, including job stability, is perceived as a bad investment—why would a company want to make a complacent workforce, when they can pare down human resource costs and rely instead on company passion. No longer dependent on loyalty to retain workers, the company

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[10] I could (and almost did) write an entire chapter on recruiting. As a highly gendered, sometimes sexualized, booming industry, recruiting is a subject that deserves far more exploration than through food alone. I intend to do this in future writing.

instead builds continued enthusiasm for work. Providing exceedingly great food completely free of the inconvenience and weight of monetary transactions is one way to make workers feel good about a company.

One might be tempted to view these practices as companies leaning into the everyday inefficiency of reproduction and care in order to become more passion-inspiring environments that workers appreciate. Certainly, a daily work lunch to look forward to is an effective proximal practice, a way for a company to align itself next to happy affects and hope notions of *the good life* "stick" (Ahmed 2010), regardless of whether or not they facilitate the actual thriving of subjects. But in addition to acting as adhesive for the workers' happy affects and for their time, retaining a workforce and maintaining workers' interest, the free provision of high-quality food does something else for the company's value. Because it is not merely that the food is good. At workplaces such as Dropbox and Airbnb, the food is also constantly changing.
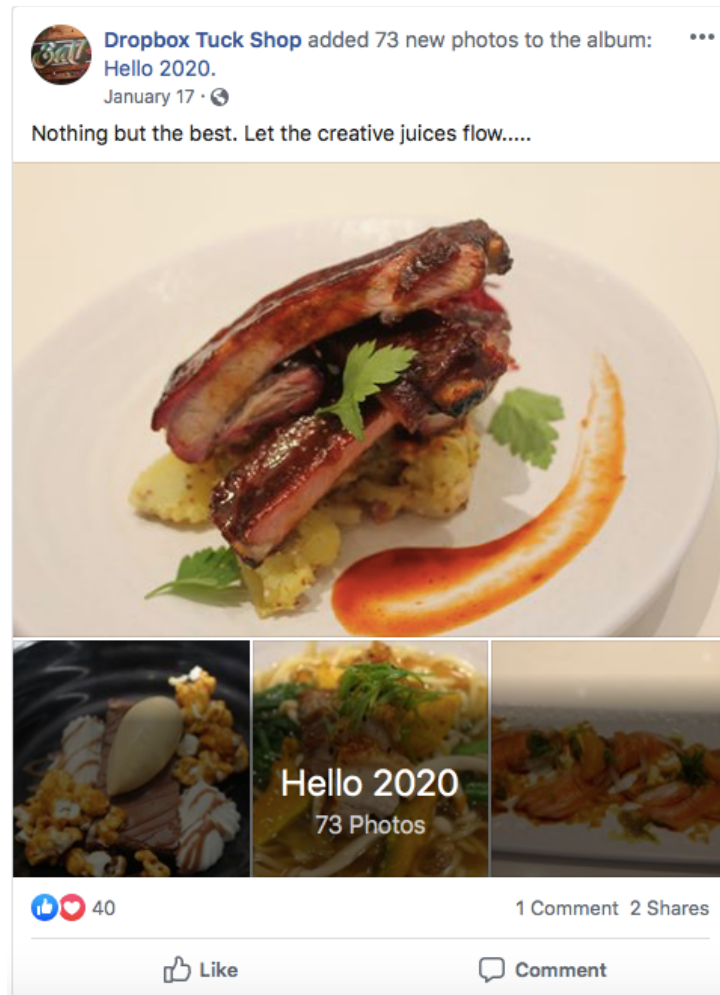
Figure 2. Dropbox Facebook post. Screenshot taken by Kao, January 2020.

At Facebook and Airbnb, there are no repeats allowed on menu items. They both also occasionally (about once a month) produce themes for menus that include clever puns and creative pop-cultural vignettes.

The Man Who Swallowed the World
David Bowie's Modern Lunch Menu - January 22, 2014

We Could be Gyros
Lambarynth (cooked over an open Fame), **Tatziki Stardust,**
Lettuce Dance, I'm Afraid of American Cheese, Suffragette Chili

Space Codity
Am I Roasting in a Tin Pan? A' L'Orange Dudes, Starmanise

Is There Rice on Mars?

Bowie Tie Pasta
Church on Thyme, Carrot Slice Me, Makes Me Parsley, Don't Believe
in Modern Olive *this dish contains no connection, nor religion

Egg Foo Young Americans
The Jean Bean Sprout, Radashes to Radashes, Oh, you Gravy Things!

Turnip Face the Change
Scarlett Queen Bitch & Golden Years Turnips from River(diamond)dog Farm

"Take a Look at the Slawman Beeting up the Wrong Gai Lan"

• Help Wanted. Must Work Well Under Pressure
• Due to Unruly Behavior, we no Longer Serve Redbull Redbull
• Restaurant Staff, Please Take your Protein Pills and Put your Hairnets on
• Come Early for Happy Hour Specials: The Sliders from Mars, Major Tamales, & Five Beers!

Chef Samuel Lippman
"Don't Lemon me Man, 'Cuz you Cantaloupe the Chicken."

Figure 3. Airbnb lunch menu. Source: https://airbnbchef.tumblr.com

Five star meals presented to creative workers at Airbnb and Uber are about

exposure and serendipity, an experience that is supposed to be conducive to creativity

and a particular notion of what the technology company's production of value means.

But some employees noticed ways that food regimes were also subtly catered

towards cognitive productivity as a means to an end. At an informant's party I attended, Brie, who worked in public relations for Airbnb (this is a recurring gendered division of labor—femme people held jobs that were "softer" skilled disciplines, like recruiting, public relations, or user experience, while all of the men I met during fieldwork worked in "hard" disciplines), was excited when I mentioned my interest in tech office food. "The food [at Airbnb] is amazing. But even though they offer such good food at Airbnb, they never have anything with sugar! Like, they never have dessert or anything! I feel like it must be intentional." Another person sitting adjacent to us who was a cofounder (and thus, had the perspective of management) of a tech startup in Mountain View interjected, "probably because they want to save on health insurance [laughs]. No, but I'm serious." In an interview with *Bon Appétit* magazine, Airbnb's chef Sam Lippman confirms that they intentionally do not serve dessert. While cost-savings on health insurance might be one factor, the reasoning is also about cultivating and caring for workers' bodies in a way to optimally perform cognitive labor. Lippman says as much about not including dessert on the menu: "We just want to ensure we're not overloading people with rich food [that] they can't really function on" (quoted in Bull 2016). The word *function* is important here. It is unlikely that one gets physically incapacitated because they ate dessert, but there might be an immeasurable cognitive edge to not eating dessert.

Constantly creative food reflects the managerial shift in the innovation economy's approach to value production. While the Fordist factory model of capitalism was about increasing absolute and relative surplus value, the innovation

economy is about Schumpeterian innovation. The assumption in relative surplus value is that there is a standard commodity and that there are different firms competing for the efficiency of production. However, in an innovation economy, there is no standard commodity. Furthermore, shareholder value is tied to the perception of the company as a whole from one day to the next. Practices like constantly changing, engaging, and playful food experiences not only contribute to the public image of the company but also to a company's potentially creative edge, some unforeseen serendipitous encounter with a meal that would not have happened otherwise.

From the start, by which I mean from Google's foray into food programs in 1999, the provision of food has always been part of a larger effort to design the atmospheric experience of work in a way that maximizes opportunities to inspire creativity—or at least, perform as much. As David Radcliffe, Google's VP of Real Estate and Workplace Services, said of designing the "living laboratory" spaces, "casual collisions are what we try and create in the work environment. You can't schedule innovation, you can't schedule idea generation." (CBS News 2013). The constantly changing offerings at these workplaces likely derive from workplace psychological studies of creativity and innovation. "We know that creativity and innovation happen when people change their environment, and especially when they expose themselves to a nature-like environment, to a natural environment," says Kimberly Elsbach (2015), a professor at the University of California, Davis Graduate School of Management, who studies workplace psychology. The lunch break thus

becomes increasingly engineered to cultivate the category of the creative subject in a late capitalist society, whether by designing away as much of the experience as possible or making it its own engrossing enhancement.

Conclusion

At the Googleplex, I note that those serving and appearing to make food includes many men and women of color. This is in contrast to consumers of food, who are predominantly white and Asian. Still, there was a higher degree of diversity at this workplace than many others, including my own university department. From the scene I observe, there is no visible cleaning staff. When I stand up to leave, Nigel instructs me to leave the dishes. "Are you sure?" I ask before realizing, no, you do not bus your own tables at Google. But this disconnect in expectation and reality reflects the way that "worker" treatment prepares the visitor to read lunch with a utopian gloss. There were explicit statements of the values of egalitarianism, including signage like, "Good ideas can come from anyone, from anywhere!" These signs obscure extreme hierarchies successfully enough that I automatically anticipated a co-op style cleanup system where I might scrap my own plates and leave my dishes in a soaking bin.

This is where the logic and cultivation of creative labor as the most valuable labor intersects with reproductive labor, integrating reproduction of the worker part way into the affective and physical experience of "belonging" to Google by devaluing the labor of those who materially support Google but do not belong. I recall a

documentary film about ScanOps in which a Google employee records ScanOps workers leaving their workplace. They wear different color badges that prohibit them from entering other buildings, work in a building separate from the main campus, and are overwhelmingly people of color. After the Google employee attempted to talk to them, he got fired. Of course there is a separate cleaning staff, and of course, they are not highly visible. This is how a purely creative, egalitarian workplace is made—the same way the egalitarian public of liberalism gets made—by excluding a class of racialized, gendered others whose reproductive labor the work is nonetheless contingent on.

In the cultural milieu of Silicon Valley, creativity and innovation is their top commodity. While the shareholder revolution had broad impacts, the agility of digital innovations, as well as the extremely short half-life of their relevance, means that for Silicon Valley companies, more attention than ever is paid to fostering what is perceived as creativity and innovation: "creativity becomes a value *in itself*" (Thrift 2000, 676). However, there's an easy slippage made in much of the literature on the new creative economy. The work done at these companies is not inherently more creative, but they produce value, and indeed their identities as companies and employees is based on the premise that they are more creative. This hierarchy of the value of technologists' creative work over others' supposedly non-creative work is not pre-existing but must be made and remade. While the temporal and aesthetic qualities entailed in the reproduction of labor power is indeed considered a well of potential value, the actual labor to produce it is low paid and flexible, subcontracted

as much as possible, in order to circumvent the cost of reproducing that workforce altogether.

A vividly imagined hierarchy of value is also reflected in the way people explained their creative work. I was sharing an Uber ride with an informant to his workplace, when he casually articulated this imagined hierarchy to me in the course of explaining his job:

> I liken it [my work] to *Chopped* actually, which is when they get into the room the chefs they, like, have all the ingredients all just laid out in front of them and then they just assemble something, they don't have to go and catch the fish and shop in the grocery store, they just have it all in front of them and web service is like offering a developer a bin of chopped carrots and a bin of chopped cucumbers and then you assemble these things and you can assemble them into different dishes with different applications so it's like offering those we call them 'platform primitives'—those core primitives you can use—to assemble something more... useful. So, like no one cares about like chopped carrots right? Like you can put a bin of chopped carrots in front of them and like, I don't want to eat this, but if they're in something, yeah. So it's the same thing: independently these platforms primitives are sort of useless but together you actually can make something that's good.

The imagined hierarchy of labor has real implications for how labor is differentially valued and how workers are actually treated. I attend a rally in Palo Alto organized by the newly formed Tech Workers Coalition and Silicon Valley Rising. This was a rally convened in response to the "Muslim ban" whose coalition, like many rallies, included groups and attendees with a diversity of interests. The overarching theme was bringing about social justice reforms in Silicon Valley through pressure on companies and governments. I heard from lots of workers who usually worked behind the scenes at large tech companies and who I was not able to approach in my other fieldwork contexts because of their precarious positions. One UNITE-HERE organizer who did not want to give her name or company contract reflected precisely on this hierarchy from the opposite position: "Our union represents workers in the service industry, which is predominantly women's work. And when it's not women's work—when it's super respected—it's like, the chef. Right? The chef is respected, but the prep cook is treated like shit. Or the housekeeper, you know—totally disposable, who cares about her."

I want to be clear that I am not suggesting that one food practice is egalitarian while the other is hierarchical. They are different sides of the same coin, the premise of which is that the cognitive labor performances deserve and necessitate higher investments. The devaluing of reproductive work is the flipside of cultivating employees that view themselves as "creating the impossible" with their labor. The experiential and affective quality of lunch—whether taken as a break or performed simultaneously with work—does a powerful job of shaping worker relations to their

own labor and, implicitly, the labor of others. Whether they are missing dessert, raving about free food, or performing their technologist credentials by eating a MealSquare, food is far more than a caloric input to the technology workplace, despite what the consumption of meal-replacement products overtly suggests.

Martha Lampland's historical study of regimes of labor valuation in communist Hungary offers a glimpse of an ambitious—if failed—modernist attempt to reduce labor input to the unit of the calorie. During a period of postwar inflation, workers were briefly paid in "calorie money," a wage indexed to a standardized basket of foodstuffs determined by a household's caloric needs. The immediate impetus for the program was controlling inflation, but there were also egalitarian hopes that the caloric wage would erase the skilled/unskilled worker distinction (Lampland 2016, 128–30). Although the experiment failed, it is useful for highlighting the cultural and historical specificity of the food-labor nexus described above. This contingency can be difficult to fully appreciate for academics in particular. As creative, cognitive laborers ourselves, it can be a challenge to create the necessary degree of analytic distance from a temporality and economic circumstance that we, in many ways, share.

The cognitive laboring experience of the relatively new digital means of production are both temporally and affectively different than even the managerial labors of previous moments in capitalism, even if the relationship to food demonstrates some continuities. At the same time, these food practices that constantly affirm the importance of creative, impossible labor implicitly reproduce an arbitrary

hierarchy between what gets to count as cognitive or creative and manual labor. Food practices, both individual in the purchase of pre-made meals and institutional in the exclusion of service workers from employee categories, contribute to the "redistribution of tedium" (Irani 2015, 729) and thus perform ideological work by constructing boundaries and value hierarchies between what gets to count as creative and non-creative labor. This boundary work is essential to an industry that has self-identified and publicly presents itself as creative and egalitarian (Turner 2006; 2009).

Like the spatial restructuring of work (chapter 2) and affective recruitment (chapter 4), these forms of experimentation with food both facilitate and index the engrossment of the cognitive laboring body into work. While lunching at one's desk is merely chipping away at the quantity of the non-work time of reproduction, these Silicon Valley companies experiment in altering the quality of that time too, whether it is spent in a lunch booth with coworkers or in front of the computer.

Both aesthetic experiments seek to support, and in doing so also produce the category of, innovation work by creating a phenomenological experience conducive to technology companies' notions of value performances. In the first approach, with precise management of pre-made meals, the reproductive labor and time involved in food prep, eating itself, and clean-up is boiled down to its minimal components (sometimes with chewing, sometimes not). In the second approach, with the opulence of at-work provisioning, the labor and time of eating is transformed into an inducement of serendipity through multiplex, imaginative, aesthetic experiences—one that is both potentially inspiring of innovation, but also nutritionally disciplining

workers for the perceived optimization of their cognitive capacity. In both forms, the relationship between production and reproduction is experimented with precisely because this relationship is itself viewed a potential means for producing value, not merely by diminishing the cost of reproduction but by investing in the reproduction of creative employees (at the expense of producing non-creative subcontractors) with the expectation that it cultivates more valuable workers. In both cases, a subjective and economic hierarchy between production and reproduction are cultivated and mediated by consumption practices.

CHAPTER 4

The Progressive Hypothesis:

Freedom Through Work in Tech's Fraternal Patriarchy

I arrive to join the work happy hour at the office of SwiftlyAI, the business-to-business San Francisco startup building artificial intelligence tools for marketing. Amber opens the door, gives me a hug, and shows me in. The office dog, a white husky named Mac, comes to greet me as well. Amber offers me a drink, then quickly interjects, "I'm so stressed. Things are so crazy right now." I make a sympathetic hum and ask what is going on. She goes on to apologize for "acting weird," even though, outwardly, she is not. "I'm so wired, I've taken two xanax and a drink and I'm still not relaxed." I knew the team had been working "nonstop" (as she said)— staying well past dinner time, working on weekends from home— towards another product launch and that this was their Friday late evening reprieve.

Before I could really ask about how the rest of the day had gone, the CEO and founder, Rocco, yells from across the room a demand to change the music. He is slouched in a lounge chair next to the sofa with his leg up, apparently due to an ankle injury. A bottle of klonipin with his name on it is on the coffee table in front of him. I start chatting with Zen about the new face in the office, a white man in his 20s. She explains that he was interviewing for a job and was asked to stay for happy hour. It is a common practice to invite prospective employees to informal affairs like this. Their ability to keep up comfortably with the conversation and gradual inebriation of the

team is understood as a test of "cultural fit." This is an empty signifier through which discrimination of many sorts gets professionalized.

I take a seat adjacent to Rocco and start reading the new sticky notes on the wall—evidence of today's brainstorming session. Before I can ask about it, Rocco turns to me and jokes "Hi, I'm the intern. Can I get your coffee?" I smile, politely acknowledging his power inversion humor without participating. Rocco barely makes eye contact with me on most visits, preferring to interact with his employees, although he did keep up the "intern" gag with me for the better part of the evening. Amber walks to sit across from me on the couch, when Rocco, despite his ailments, grunts and pulls her into his lap. "You're the best," he says. She nervously laughs, then stands back up to take a seat on the couch. I notice, amongst the other post-its, a single piece of computer paper. On it is written: "a good pitch is like a short skirt— long enough to cover the subject but short enough to keep you interested." It announces the heterosexual male gaze as the default perspective in the office: a short skirt is seen as an invitation, a "pitch," made by the wearer to lure onlookers, not something you wear on a hot day. Later in the evening, I join Amber across the office, who is now fiddling with the playlist. As the conversation moves from what song to play next to the product launch and her work, she says admiringly of Rocco, "He's a genius." This is something she would frequently repeat.

Steeped in a local spirit of settler colonial frontierism and western possibility, the history of 1960s counterculture, and a longstanding LGBTQi community, the technology industry of the San Francisco bay region held out a different kind of

promise for what American capitalism could be: a place where work was meaningful, wealth followed creativity for the greater good and personal connections could be made out of shared visions of progress instead of the pedigree and wealth concentration that plagued the East Coast. In contrast to Wall Street, Silicon Valley capitalism had the veneer of progressive politics.

Over the course of the last decade though, another narrative emerged in the public perception alongside the progressive one: corporate buses epitomized a parasitic relationship between private industry and public infrastructure, and military contracts, which had always been endemic to the tech industry, gained public importance in the new forms of surveillance they enabled. Furthermore, the image of Silicon Valley as a site for egalitarian work and a culture guided by creativity rather than hierarchy has been eroded. Today startup culture is more likely to be compared to a college fraternity than a commune, with popular books such as Emily Chang's (2018) *Brotopia* highlighting both the concentration of power in a cadre of men at the top and the culture of misogyny that pervades everyday life. Upload, SoFi, Uber are just a few examples of current and former technology startups in Silicon Valley that have had recent high-profile incidents of sexual harassment and discrimination. The problem extends upstream to venture capital firms as well, as Ellen Pao's testimony on the misogynistic environment in one the area's biggest venture capital firms attests. The sexism is not specific to small startups either: Google, which has attempted to replicate the freewheeling company cultures of startups even as they grow into multi-billion-dollar company, has also had major public scandals,

amounting in the 2018 walkout in protest of the company's handling of sexual misconduct, gender inequality, and racism.

After reports emerged that the chief executive of SoFi (at the time, a leading online lender) had sexually harassed his assistant, that male coworkers expressing arousal by the appearance of female coworkers was commonplace, one woman working in the company told the press: "it was a frat house" (Popper and Benner 2017). Such comparisons of Silicon Valley companies to American college fraternities are not difficult to find among women working in tech who are frustrated with the environment. In this chapter, I consider that these comparisons to fraternities are not simply shorthand for "sexism," but rather they identify a formation of fraternal patriarchal power that startups recreate over and over.

Introduced as a term in political theory by Carole Pateman (1988), *fraternal patriarchy* highlights a form of gender dichotomy in which women are subordinated to men not as fathers but as brothers. As I will discuss, fraternal patriarchy has social and political antecedents in many Western social contract origin stories, planting patriarchy at the heart of modern political rights and notions of freedom and equality. Fraternal patriarchy, unwittingly practiced by startups, is a power dynamic in which a spirited group of equals, implicitly gendered men, feel that their progressiveness grants them sexual entitlement to women's bodies, who are inevitably caught in a double bind of gunning for equality in a brotherhood premised on gender inequality. Fraternal patriarchy is carried out in the gender binary ideology of the bourgeois nuclear family via alternative kinship imaginaries of progressive solidarities, as well

as nationalist narratives of revolutionary men and what they deserve. These men, working as equals but only to each other, inherited a local identity and purpose of changing the world for the better. I tease out some of the overdetermination of this cultural form, from the intentional communities that today's tech culture is a direct descendent of, to the evolution of management theory, and show how these forces converge in my informant's subjective experience.

When I first started fieldwork, I suspected that tech's reinvigoration of masculine power was a defensive reaction against labor's feminization. Even if entrepreneurship has a masculine history, computer work has been historically feminized in American culture in contrast with the masculine work of manufacturing. In other words, I suspected I'd find the Bartleby Scriveners of the world reincarnated as today's tech incels (self-named "involuntary celibate" men who feel vindictively victimized by women's refusal to sleep with them), except now with the privileges of cultural and literal capital making it easier to seem both progressive and more creative. American culture's interest in the decline of manufacturing—an oft told story only bolstered by the successful 2016 Trump campaign—coincided with its interest in the rise of Silicon Valley's tech capitalism and the idea that it was paving a new way for a "creative class," (Florida 2002) further suggesting that tech's investments in American masculinity emerged out of a perceived threat to masculinity.

These undercurrents of defensive masculine gender in the national imaginary might very well be at work, but I was not able to observe them or see them reflected

in my interpersonal observations during fieldwork. What I observed instead was a fraught economy of intimacy and power, with the affective intensity of modern nuclear family life, laid onto an economic arrangement that was historically supposed to be its opposite—the workplace.

Amber is at the center of my observations around sexual-gender dynamics in the workplace. The startup she worked at, SwiftlyAI, was the one I had the most ethnographic engagement with, having regular observations of their meetings, including regular workdays, and also involved myself in their social extravagancies. A single white woman, Amber only ever seemed to maintain both intimate, dyadic female relationships on one hand, and what she described as "unhealthy" relationships with men that she referred to as "womanizers," on the other.

One of Amber's previous female friendships evolved into a years-long romance, but as non-practicing Catholic, Amber's sexual history with or interest in women was a subject she preferred not to discuss. Instead, she discussed with me her various casual sexual encounters with male "womanizers" and "cheaters" (men she slept with who were in committed, exclusive relationships with other people), and occasional dates with men she met through dating apps that did not pan out into a relationship. Blaming herself for this pattern, she decided to go to therapy to get to the root of why she cannot sustain a heterosexual relationship. "I don't have any good models of that sort of thing. Actually, I don't have good models of a healthy relationship at all. Everyone around me is so messed up." She suspected the man she had been having sex with on and off for the last few years was in a committed

relationship again, but that she did not want to know if it was consensually an open relationship, a common practice in tech, or if he was just cheating. Amber told me, "The Silicon Valley type—the only type around me—is definitely a *different* type of undesirable man. They're not deadbeats. They make good money, they manage their finances, they invest in all the right cryptocurrencies. They're just not great relationship material either."

Amber's successful career, like the careers of many men, was facilitated by outsourcing the labor of cooking, in her case, to service workers in the form of frequent takeout. I do not presume to represent the experience of women and gender minorities of all backgrounds with this chapter's analysis. It is about white, cis-gendered subjectivity as a bifurcated disciplining of subjects into masculine and feminine roles, but my analysis has implications for BIPOC, trans- and non-binary subjects who must also navigate this power dynamic with additional difficulty. For example, Ren, the Filipina American in the office who self-presented on the masculine side of gender-queer, did not get pulled into laps or drugged at parties, was also kept at arm's length from Rocco in interactions, and ultimately fired for inscrutable (to her coworkers) behavior that, had she been the femme confidante that Amber was, might have warranted more sympathy. With additional fieldwork, I hope to flesh out more of how this power dynamic works for different race- and gender-positioned subjects. But in my work with SwiftlyAI, I found that difference between Amber's experience of the tech world as a white woman and the white men she was

surrounded by was vast and speaks directly to the dominance of fraternal-patriarchal culture in tech.

I want to be clear at the outset: this chapter is an anthropological analysis of gender hierarchy. Amber never referred to her own experiences as sexual harassment, and while I might refer to it in my introduction and conclusion as such, I do not dwell on this terminology either. To me, engaging in debates about the legal category of sexual harassment is not especially crucial to my analysis of a cultural formation of gender and power, except as much as the term and concept already exists in my fieldsite. When I use the term *sexual harassment* it is because it succinctly refers to experiences of gender hierarchy and discrimination circumscribed within workplace relations, and this framing is culturally relevant in my fieldsite. However, this chapter does not engage in legal or activist discussions, nor does it weigh in on what kinds of discourses and bureaucratic processes might best serve an egalitarian workplace. My approach here is analytic, serving to produce knowledge about a phenomenon, and not activist: I write as an anthropologist interested in analyzing a particular formation of gender and power, and the historical, cultural, and political conditions of its emergence.

Tech companies and their workers defined themselves and understood themselves as not just changing society—they were revolutionizing work itself. What became clear throughout my fieldwork was that gender within the tech startup world had to be understood in relation to the family, as well as how work was posited as the new family. By positing work as family, I mean informants literally described work

as family, and also that the reciprocal relations, identification, and affective attachments experienced amongst coworkers and the company rivaled that of the bourgeois enlightenment ideal of the sentimental nuclear family. In the Bay Area tech startup, among other things, it is the intimacy of work to life, the dense layering of references and realities of familial relatedness, infused with the spirited cult of mission-drivenness, shared meaning, and progressive purpose— in short, the semblance of equality that enables coercive and abusive dynamics to manifest in deeply unequal gender relationships. It is also the struggle over what "progress" looks like that infuses work culture with frat culture. The fraternal culture of Silicon Valley is not contrary to the spirit of work as freedom and passion, or to the company as alternative kinship. Instead, these local legacies about the meaning and affective relation to work facilitate fraternal-patriarchal performances, intimacies, and structures of power. Startup patriarchy is best understood as an exercise of fraternal patriarchy that leverages a revolutionary ethos against an imagined inherited structure of power. In its rebellion and "progress" away from inherited, less legitimate, organizations of power, it nonetheless reasserts a fraternal patriarchy premised on gender inequality.

Changing the world: the legacy of intentional communities in tech

A social media manager for a small adtech startup once said to me, "I didn't have a boss. The boss was the founder." This comment referenced two things: one is the structure of a company so small that everyone is responsible for their own self-

management; the other is the affective ties that characterize the relationship between today's tech startup members and a founder as distinct from the business culture of bureaucratic employees and bosses. *Boss* connotes hierarchy and bureaucracy, denoted by offices and cubicles, and antagonisms in the workplace. Resentment of bosses is not only accepted, it is expected. Whereas *founder* already assumes a shared meaning and mission, leader of a group of spirited believers volunteering their creative energies in a flexible, innovative, dynamic workplace, and a progressive way of changing the world.

The shift in management theory and the changes in macrostructures of employment that support it have been features of the transformation of work in late capitalism in the U.S. and Europe especially (see Boltanski and Chiapello 2005), but Silicon Valley and the San Francisco Bay Area have arguably served as a ground zero to unfettered idealization of neomanagement theory not just as a set of best practices for running an office but as a utopian ideology. So how did the technology workplaces of Silicon Valley emerge as the icons of social progress, creative American capitalism, idealistic values-driven workplaces, and—at the same time—toxic work cultures? Its local history as a site of countercultural revolution, intentional communities, and military-industrial-academic entanglements all contribute to making Silicon Valley what it is today.

Tech capitalism in Silicon Valley is not a story of how countercultural movement ideals were appropriated by the forces of capital, technology, or the state. Rather, what historian Fred Turner (2006) calls the "New Communalist" wing of the

124

counter cultural movement embraced these forces early on. Turner traces today's

Silicon Valley spirit to a 1960s movement initiated by Stewart Brand. Brand had

spent time driving from one intentional community to another in Colorado,

California, and New Mexico, selling camping equipment, books, tools, and supplies

for building high-tech, off-the-grid experiments in communal living. Brand returned

to Menlo Park to start the Portola Institute, which has been described as "a gathering

place and incubator of sorts for computer researchers, academics, career engineers,

hobbyists and members of the counterculture" (Wiener 2018). There, he produced the

first issue of the *Whole Earth Catalog* in 1968. Many of the values esteemed by the

Whole Earth catalog shaped what is known as "tech culture" today: autodidacticism,

capacious embrace of technology and research (regardless of the funding source—

military, private corporations, or academia), at the same time, anti-establishment

individualism, a kibbutz-like notion of the ability of individuals to build autonomous,

egalitarian communities that ultimately change broader society. The *Whole Earth*

Catalog statement of purpose read: "We are as gods and might as well get used to it."

(quoted in Wiener 2018)

Like most projects with universalist ambitions, the *WE Catalog* mission

projected and appealed to specific interests: namely, overwhelmingly racially- and

class- privileged people who believed in political progress through meaningful,

technical-material work done in harmony with community, as opposed to political

struggle. Revolution is not a protest that leads to redistribution of power and

relinquishing of privilege, but an evolution of material environments in which

technology and design improve life for all. Jay Baldwin, design editor of the *WE Catalog* extolled this value in detail in a documentary about the *WE* network. Sitting in trailer full of blueprints in the desert, Baldwin says:

> There's an old adage actually that tools are extensions of your body, like pliers are just very strong fingers and that a hammer is just a very strong fist, but I found that a whole group of tools is an extension of your mind in that it enables you to bring your ideas into physical form. Actually what you're doing is you're adding so much energy to the idea that people can see it…. I regard my life as an experiment….After you discover what sort of human being is being tried with your particular genetic makeup, then you should drive that just as far as you can to see what it's good for, and I think that's your responsibility. And I think also that is the responsibility of designers, people acting as designers, to carry out their ideas, all the way to the point of living in them. So that you don't go home at 5 o clock, that you live in what you're doing. (Florin 2018)

While Baldwin espouses an internal virtue in and inherent moral responsibility to work, and assumption that the will to work must come from within oneself to be worthy work, drudgery and effort are entirely absent. It resonates clearly with neoliberal economic restructuring of employment itself into entrepreneurial voluntarism, but also with countercultural spiritualism that celebrates the unique individual against impersonalizing bureaucratic forces.

Founders of Airbnb, Stripe, and early employees of Facebook, and many other influential figures in today's Silicon Valley scene were part of a cult following of the *Whole Earth Catalog*. Steve Jobs (2005) described the Whole Earth Catalog as "Google in paperback form, thirty-five years before Google came along." Jobs was not referring to the search infrastructure (let alone the ads) so much as the notion that information of any sort, agricultural to technical to social, deserved to be shared, used, and leveraged for world-building projects. These beliefs about the morality and worldly power of individual, impassioned work (in this historical context, almost exclusively that of white, male designers), and the creativity of a collaborating group of equals continue in Silicon Valley today. They have been propagated by influential success stories, figureheads of the tech world, but also by everyday experiments in work-life. The work of tech revolutionaries is not being humble, but believing in one's unique individual genius.

Fraternities might be considered intentional communities of a sort—a group of non-related people brought together in a communal living situation, in which they shed notions about themselves as individuals from birth-given nuclear families and take on a collective house identity, a fraternal brotherhood. But how do they distinguish themselves from college fraternity culture? Back in 2012, even before Silicon Valley's national reputation became tainted by sexual and political scandals, a resident of a communal house in Cupertino called the Rainbow Mansion expressed both the omnipresent potential to be a frat and the desire to distinguish themselves

from frats in an interview with the *Financial Times* about communal living in Silicon Valley. The FT writes:

> Seven people live here, from the ivy league of Silicon Valley companies, such as Apple, Google and Tesla. They are from America, the UK, Serbia and Moldova. While none are blood related, they call each other family. "We're not a frat house," says Mike Grace, 26, a lab manager and researcher at Nasa. "We're an intentional community."

Another Google software engineer resident's comment explains it: "People here care about changing the world" (Dembosky 2012).

The "change the world" vision that characterizes so much of Silicon Valley rhetoric, and affective investments, during this time is also evidence of this legacy. Technology startups in the Bay Area are held together by this prescribed work-life collapse and mission driven sentimentality. The resignification of work is a source of regional and industry specific pride. One informant, Michael, who was primarily working as an independent consulting business expressed how his working in tech entailed a sense of involvement in a social movement to revolutionize work the first time I met him. I visited his office in SOMA, where his company rented desks and rooms in a coworking space. He said, "It's great working here. You meet new people all the time and share ideas about what you're working on. I love it." We sit down and, since he knew very little about me, I explain that I'm researching the changing meaning of work. He interjects, "That's fantastic. We need a new word for work, one without stigma. It's not just a job. There's a real movement in tech to make work

better for people, to make work that matters." Michael believed that the companies that succeed in Silicon Valley did so because they, in his words, "get it… when people feel creative, they feel free." While financial success was the measure of success, "work is not all about the money." He goes on to tell me about he and most of his contracting friends in tech have their own "passion project" companies in addition to contracts they take for cash flow. His is an e-gaming website. "I lose money on it, but I love it."

Of Cult and Kin: Mobilized Sentiments, Troubled Boundaries

The mission-drivenness that infuses tech startups with passion and the sense of collective belonging in a social movement provides meaning, but it also intensifies the stakes of harmony with work, and with coworkers. The more time subjects spend doing something, the more they become personally invested in being personally invested—in viewing their company not as something external to them but as something they believe in and that they can uniquely contribute to. I observed this occasional suspense and re-affirmation of the "magic circle" of the mission only in flashes of self-reflexivity during interviews. As Amber remarked once over dinner, "If I don't drink the kool-aid and believe in my company, then what am I doing? [Picks up her phone] Building an app that doesn't even work and that no one uses?" She laughed, placed her phone back down, and took a sip of wine, and with that seemed to temporarily quiet her flicker of doubt and allow her to reset her priorities. She continued on to talk about the project's next steps and how she was excited.

What she and others are saying in these moments of critical reflexivity is that she had invested too much of herself in the company to question whether she should be investing so much of herself in the company. In her direct reference of a toxic intentional community or cult, she draws out the subjective and social stakes of what she is doing. As Bill Aulet, managing director of the Martin Trust Centre for MIT Entrepreneurship, said recently in an interview, "the ones [startups] that survive are the ones that have a cult…. A cult can be a positive thing in the sense that it creates cohesion. Now a cult is a bad thing if it excludes people in an unjust way, but the challenge of a startup is *existence*" (Butler 2016). Amber has to believe in the mission of her company and become fully engrossed in its survival to justify and explain her actions to herself, and furthermore her experience of her company as cult is the norm.

True to many intentional communities that Silicon Valley culture is derivative of, the mission Amber participates in and subscribes to is chosen not from a position of rational decision-making but is experienced as an attraction, and romantic feelings are distributed and acknowledged outside the bounds of monogamous, dating relationships. Unlike Matty, who "did not" have a boss but a founder, Amber did consider Rocco, the founder, a boss. However, theirs was a relationship with emotional intimacy that Amber struggled with nonetheless. At an interview with Amber in which she provided a history of her work life, I asked her how she ended up at a startup after working in a relatively large corporate environment in Sunnyvale. She said, "You pick your job by your boss, or at least that's what I do. You have to find your soulmate, someone who will see in you what makes you special." Amber

130

was doing her best work, and perhaps for the first time, feeling really good about it, like it resonated with her unique genetic makeup, just as Baldwin said was designers' "responsibility". Many who work in startup teams do not like to consider themselves to have a "boss" in the conventional sense because work is not just a paycheck but the scene of an unfolding story akin to romantic love, a quasi-Hegelian dialectical realization of one's unique capacities in the world as facilitated by an other. Silicon Valley proposes a world in which you can have it all by loving work. Amber approaches her job search like the search for a soulmate, except the intimacy of an interpersonal relationship elides the structural power inequalities that form the background for the scene of a job interview. Her search is more akin to the *The Bachelor*, where she is competing against hundreds of people for a chance at economic security that she happens to love.

At a networking event for Black founders, I strike up a conversation with the person standing next to me who would ultimately become an ongoing informant. His name is Francis, and he runs a finance technology (fintech) firm in Oakland, which offers refinancing options to low-income borrowers that are typically only available to businesses. He tells me he's from Haiti, and says he got the inspiration to do something for "the poor" because of how he saw his parents struggle. I know this is a well-rehearsed pitch, but it feels sincere nonetheless. He says he likes anthropologists. His co-founder did his BA in anthropology as well, so he's happy to talk to me. I ask a question that is out of the norm of social behavior amongst tech networking in Silicon Valley: "Do you have a family?"— of course, colloquially the meaning of this

is, do you have a romantic partner and children. He laughs a bit, pauses, then answers, "I have a family. It's my work family. The company is our baby." Francis is joking, but he's also letting me in on the open secret my question was ignorant to. In Bay Area tech startups, work is not just work but also family, friends, and politics: it is totalizing, leaving no room for cultivating non-work life. His invocation of "family" accurately reflects the intensity with which workers, startup entrepreneurs in particular, affectively invest in their work, and the impact this has on relationships between coworkers. As Martín and Michael, two single childless men I introduced in the previous chapter, both put it, their time together in the startup house made them "brothers."

The Modern Family Firm

The contemporary tech startup carries both the history of intentional communities self-fashioned as revolutionary experiments in egalitarianism and the patriarchal nuclear family model those communities defined themselves against. Family firms in capitalism are both the exception to the rule and the norm. In the modern bourgeois ideal that love, sentimentality, personalism, and intimacy fundamentally and intuitively equalizes people in otherwise hierarchical relations, allowing them a type of freedom that economic relations cannot.[11] Further, what

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[11] For instance, this quote from Rousseau: "The first movements of the heart were the effects of this new situation, which united in a common dwelling husbands and wives, fathers and children; the habit of living together generated the sweetest sentiments known to man, conjugal love and paternal love. Each family became a little society,

constitutes the economic unit was its separation from the familial unit, those of civil society and economy separately from domestic-familial. Empirically, these are never entirely separate, but their ideal separation matters in capitalism as a gendered ideological basis for them both that impacted women's participation in waged work since industrialization (see Kessler-Harris 1982). Modernity resignified domesticity as bourgeois family life, a center of consumption (as opposed to production) and the reproduction of the labor force. This process of resignification, the transformation of cultural and economic functions of the family, is of course, not gender-neutral but constitutive of modern, white femininity and masculinity vis-à-vis their inclusion in or exclusion from the formal economy, and the implicit exclusion of women of color and lower-class women from attaining this ideal while being held to it. As studies of the transformation of kinship under colonial and modernization regimes demonstrate, the separation of kinship and economy, and of the bourgeois sentimental family from politics, is crucial to the project of constructing rational (in contradistinction to racialized, supposedly nonmodern, traditional) economic categories (See Brenner 1998 for analysis of construction of liberal separate spheres, gender, and kinship in Suharto Indonesia; Birla 2009 for an analysis of how market practices that enmeshed kinship ties negotiated the legality of their "excessive jointness").

There are lots of different types of family firms in American capitalist history, and the contemporary startup emerges out of these different histories. There's the

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all the better united because mutual affection and liberty were its only bonds" (Rousseau 1984, 112).

family as ideologically separate from economy, the family *as* economy (family firms that reference mercantilism and handiwork trades), and the new imbrication of familial affect onto economy in the white-collar workplace, which simultaneously draws on muddies up both. Only in a society where economic relations are ideologically cold and unfeeling, constituted in opposition to the freedom of family as sentimental, reciprocal love, could interpersonal sentimentality become mutually exclusive with exploitation. In fact, recruitment of sentimentality precisely within this context (in which it is categorically opposed to economic exploitation) is critical to forms of neoliberal capitalism.

By mid-20th century, workplace psychology imported not just the language of the modern patriarchal nuclear family but its affective-psychic relationality into the workplace. Eva Illouz (2007) argues that the making-all-encompassing-and-meaningful of work was not, as some have argued, the result of ongoing neoliberalization but of a small event in the history of workplace psychology that actually changed how management was conceived, as a result of what *workers* wanted.

The Hawthorne experiments, performed by Elton Mayo, transformed theories and social conceptualizations of management. Conducted from 1924-1927 in General Electric factories, the Hawthorne experiments broke with previous thinking in experimental psychology that attended to moral qualities of the productive personality and instead focused on emotional transactions. Mayo's main finding, which transformed management theory, was that productivity increased if a work

relationship included care and attention to workers' feelings. However, the finding itself brought a more significant intervention and transformation made by the Hawthorne experiments. Illouz explains:

> Mayo revolutionized management theories because, at the same time that he recast the moral language of selfhood into the dispassionate terminology of psychological science, he substituted a new lexicon of 'human relations' for the engineers' rhetoric of rationality that had hitherto prevailed. By suggesting that conflicts were not a matter of competition over scarce resources but rather resulted from tangled emotions, personality factors, and unresolved psychological conflicts, Mayo established a discursive continuity between the family and the workplace and in fact introduced the psychoanalytic imagination at the very heart of the language of economic efficiency. (2007, 15, italics in original)

In an opinion that differs from many other scholars of late capitalism, including Boltanski and Chiapello, Illouz argues that psychological transformation of management was not proliferating as a new form of insidious power but because it appealed to workers. Illouz explains, "it democratized the power-ridden relations between workers and managers and instilled the new belief that one's personality—independent of social status—was the key to social and managerial success" (2007, 18).

Combined with neoliberal restructuring, Illouz's analysis of this relatively overlooked aspect in a widely referenced transformative point in management evolution tells us that the psychic resonance of managerial and familial, of the feminization of workers, was not a coincidental emergence of bat wings and bird wings—the Hawthorne experiments suggest the modern bourgeois family at the heart of psychoanalysis, and interestingly the woman worker as universal worker, was spliced in and then forgotten. To me, this does not discount that neomanagement theory was also developed and become popular because it is advantageous to capital, but it does speak to what is missed when only considered a top-down movement: neomanagement theory, of the type that is the norm in startup offices and many others today, creates, in some ways, a more positive experience for workers.

When Francis speaks of his work family, it is symptomatic of this broader history in which the emotional needs of workers are supposed to be managed like the interpersonal dynamics of a family, as well as Silicon Valley's particular notion of the startup as cult, as fictive kin. But, unlike actual family firms organized by nuclear family structures which are perceived to uphold tradition, the fictive kin-cults organized by tech startups are understood as markers of progress precisely because they are mission-driven intentional communities, collaborations between presumed equals. Because of this perceived departure from parochial forms of family capitalism, the intensities and affects that cohere in startup relationships are presumed to be progressive and good. This evolution of the familial firm parallels the Enlightenment transformation of the nuclear family, from patriarchal, irrational

authority to sentimental shelter from the cold and rational forces of the market, where other-identification and intimacy supposedly enable the loving cultivation of unique individual personalities and moral citizens. When Amber calls her boss her soulmate, or when Francis calls work his family, this is said affectionately and positively. Recognition and mutualism feel good for worker and boss alike.

There are reciprocities and rewards that come from the cult-like startup. In addition to meaningful work and a sense of belonging, the sense of kinship also garnered material security for those who endured with a company until the end. After SwiftlyAI went under, Amber moved into a new position at another company. She was no longer in a sales role as she has been for the past decade. Instead, she became a recruiter, a position that is typically filled by conventionally attractive[12] young women like herself, a sign that tech companies assume that the main demographic of "talent" they are trying to reach is young, heterosexual, men who like being pursued professionally by pretty women. She does not have any previous experience in recruiting, but she is good at it, she explains, because she is "good at managing relationships and advocating for a specific person." She got the job, in part, because her previous boss, Rocco, had arranged for her and other employees to move to this company when their startup folded. Amber says Rocco tried to find everyone on the team a new job. She felt that his gesture, leveraging his social connections to secure

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[12] This aesthetic is not a given but the outcome of immense, unaccounted for investments of time, energy, and money. Despite only being 32 at the time, Amber regularly received botox injections, manicures, and had an almost hour long daily routine involving expensive makeup application and hair straightening.

his employees a place to land, was a testament to his loyalty. It was confirmation to her that he cared about his now disbanded work team as family and not merely as coworkers.

…And Fraternity For All: Sexual Exploits of Progressive Workplaces

In the 1960s sexual revolution, "frigid" emerged as an insult used on a woman unwilling to having sex with a particular man with the hopes that her *no* would be shamed into a *yes*. After all, if sex was freedom, didn't she want to be free? It is one way in which women's bodily autonomy has been cajoled, coerced, and manipulated away in the name of progress. In today's Silicon Valley, powerful men also see themselves as freeing sex from a supposedly sex-negative society. Mixed with the rhetoric of spirituality, at Burning Man festivals and in private homes, wealthy executives host invitation-only, MDMA facilitated sex parties that they see as pushing boundaries of cultural sexual norms. But as journalist Emily Chang documents in her book, *Brotopia* (2018), these supposedly progressive parties are often experienced by some women participants as uncomfortable, pressuring circumstances where male heterosexual fantasies dominate: gay and bisexual intimacy between men is conspicuously absent, ratios of women to men are tightly controlled to facilitate group sex between one man and multiple women, and the only naked bodies hired for the display of food are female bodies. As Chang summarizes, "Rich men expecting casual sexual access to women is anything but a new paradigm" (2018, 185). This section is about this paradigm.

During an interview in which I remarked on the closeness between Amber and Rocco, she said, "Well, one time he drugged me." I was stunned. "What?" I asked, in disbelief that I had heard correctly. She nodded. I asked, "What do you mean, he drugged you?" She continued, "Him and his friend. It was a holiday party at a house. We were all hanging out and drinking. They slipped something in my drink. They said it was poppers, which I guess is a drug that gay men used to take to relax before sex." Her description—something dissolved into a drink—does not match how poppers are administered, suggesting that, in fact, another type of drug they did not want to identify to her was slipped into her drink. "What happened? How did you know you were drugged?" Amber said, "Oh I started feeling really weird, and for a while too. I started freaking out. I guess they [the drugs] are not supposed to give you that reaction, but they did. So, they told me what they did. It was just a joke. I got mad at them but they just thought it was funny," she shrugged.

As she recounts it, Amber temporarily got angry, but ultimately laughed it off to continue socializing at the party, even though her bodily autonomy was compromised for their joke. These are the terms of her inclusion in her crowd, that she always be willing to laugh at her own violation, which she also gets angry about. The pattern—a group of men, an invitation to a party, a drugged drink, laughter at a woman's violation—all reflect the sexual behaviors of American fraternal social order. As anthropologist Peggy Reeves Sanday has analyzed in her (2007) ethnography of American campus fraternity life, this sequence of events is a ritualized formula that often precipitates a gang rape in fraternal culture, but is not

139

understood by the men themselves as rape because the victim's body is secured

through alcohol, drugs, and soft forms of coercion as opposed to brute force.

Regardless of whether or not there was intent to rape Amber, her positionality

in this power dynamic is partly related to the rape victim, but is further complicated

by the fact that her employment depends on fitting in as an equal in this coworking

environment where women's sexual objectification is the basis for the motivational

phrases plastered on the office walls. If she refuses to play along when pulled into her

boss's lap, or when drugged at a party, she compromises her job, her integral position

in the company which she must, in order to do her job well, "drink the kool aid."

One might suggest that the drugging incident is no different than the hazing

done between men. Two things complicate the easy equation of Amber and an equal

fraternity brother: 1) Amber is a woman, not a man, and her work environment, from

the "short skirts" inspirational phrase to her boss's comments about women's

appearances mentioned in other chapters, to unwanted lap-pulling, not only genders

Amber as such but reinforces that there is gender hierarchy at play, and 2) hazing

between men, almost exclusively done in the context of pledging of new brothers, is

also a series of violations, but it follows a ritual formation of which sexual difference

and hierarchy, namely masculine sexual domination over women, are crucial (Sanday

2007, 165–79). In addition to being with the company almost from the beginning,

Amber cannot submit as a new pledge and emerge from this rite of passage as an

equal in the brotherhood from a process premised on her innate inferiority. At the

same time, she must demonstrate that she can inhabit both the position of the

fraternity brother and be an equal member of the team, and the position of the woman whose objectification and violation fortifies their fraternal bond.

The link between willingness to be sexualized by men and employment itself, particularly for female recruiters, was further underscored by another story Amber told of the recruiting company she joined. She explained, "They stopped doing work happy hour because it got out of hand," she says, matter of factly. I ask what she means by "out of hand". Amber says her new boss, "a total womanizer" who she likes personally nonetheless, did not handle a recent incident very well at the last happy hour:

> This girl just started stripping in the office. It was someone he [the CEO] invited. She just started dancing and taking off her clothes. No one, including him, knew in advance that she was going to do that, but he didn't stop her either. We all just stood there uncomfortably.

Amber continued, "He had to go in early the next day to get her bra off the ceiling rafters before we got there… The whole thing was just weird. But anyway, so we haven't done office happy hours since. He hired her though." She was joining the team as a recruiter.

Even though legally, sex and work do not mix, culturally, the mixture is practically an industry norm. But it is not merely sex itself out of place that appears again and again in these stories. Of interest here is what form of sexuality is dominant and on display (heteropatriarchal), the gender hierarchies implicit in these instances, how this dominant heteropatriarchal sexuality emerges in supposedly socially

141

progressive environments to reproduce itself in a new way. Conventionally attractive men are not stripping in offices to get jobs as recruiters, inspirational quotes on the wall are not figuring men's bodies into sex objects and their wardrobe choices into invitations. Reading these performances as examples of the tech industry simply pushing the boundaries of polite society erases the ways in which they re-entrench heteropatriarchal dynamics through this narrative.

One might argue that beauty in these circumstances confers some degree of professional privilege for thin white women who fulfill the desired aesthetic (again, with heavy unremunerated investments of time, energy, surgical alterations—"baby botox" is common—, and at personal expense), but the occasional gain from that comes at great cost. It affirms and reinforces a gender hierarchy in which white men are not only in control but are entitled to women's bodies for evaluation and visual consumption. As Cottom (2019) writes, "beauty is not good capital"—but one that centers hetero-patriarchal masculine pleasure. Feminine forms of fashioning in other contexts, such as in pink-collar sectors of information work in Barbados, have been vital ingredients through which "the status and position of … employees are made strategically ambiguous" (Freeman 2000, 213). However, in the case of Amber, and many women working in the San Francisco tech sector, status is presumably not at play for anyone in the "holacratic" friendly-familial startup team.

It is not simply that intimacy and informality worked against Amber. While there is no human relations department to file a complaint with in SwiftlyAI, such bureaucratic procedures often do not institutionally protect women and other gender

142

minorities in tech anyway, as in the case of Susan Fowler at Uber, who was told by Uber's HR that since the harasser was a "high performer" and it was probably an "innocent mistake" that he would not face consequences, that he would probably give her a poor performance review due to her report, and there was nothing they could do about that (Fowler 2017). What Amber is confronting is an industry-wide culture steeped in the assumption that it—tech— is synonymous with progress for the greater good, that the men involved deserve to be catered to, and that these work relations in which she is ostensibly equal are the best she can hope for.

The extent to which work is the new family works to enable this form of sexual harassment in much the same way familial ideology enables sexual abuse within nuclear families. The feeling of necessity to belong, coupled with the societal expectation that family members love each other uniquely and only have each other's interests at heart, condenses an affective fortress around the truth of abuse, against any individual challenge to the story of harmonized interests.[13] The company has become a totality of sorts—they are Amber's friends, people she shares all triumphs and failures with, the company is the vehicle through which she finds her unique place in the world, her soul mates who see her as special and talented, not to mention her paycheck. There is too much at stake.

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[13] I do not mean to suggest that the experience of sexual abuse within nuclear families is the same as sexual harassment experienced at work. This comparison is meant to highlight an analogous function in the framing of familial relatedness, how the intimate, family-like workplace creates an unseen, affective obstacle to recognizing, naming, and challenging sexual harassment.

The experience of total immersion and subsequent isolation in the face of sexual harassment was expressed in a recent essay published in the *New York Times* from a former Googler who had left. She writes:

> What I found [in Google] was a surrogate family. During the week, I ate all my meals at the office. I went to the Google doctor and the Google gym. My colleagues and I piled into Airbnbs on business trips, played volleyball in Maui after a big product launch and even spent weekends together, once paying $170 and driving hours to run an obstacle course in the freezing rain. My manager felt like the father I wished I'd had. He believed in my potential and cared about my feelings. All I wanted was to keep getting promoted so that as his star rose, we could keep working together. This gave purpose to every task, no matter how grueling or tedious. (Nietfeld 2021)

So when a coworker began making inappropriate comments about her body, she knew that:

> Saying anything about his behavior meant challenging the story we told ourselves about Google being so special. The company anticipated our every need — nap pods, massage chairs, Q-Tips in the bathroom, a shuttle system to compensate for the Bay Area's dysfunctional public transportation — until the outside world began to seem hostile. Google was the Garden of Eden; I lived in fear of being cast out.
> (Nietfeld 2021)

The fraternity culture of Silicon Valley, including its self-narration as a project to "change the world," brings to mind that tale conjured by Sigmund Freud and René Girard as the primordial origin for totemism, the Oedipal complex, and the collectivized super-ego bonding of society in both *Totem and Taboo* and *Moses and Monotheism*. Brothers, jealous of the father's sexual monopoly of women, band together to kill the father, ending their natural subjection to the father and establishing a new civil order— with equal rights in sexual access to the women. Totemism supposedly emerged as a means to ritually process the guilt of the parricide. Freedom and equal entitlement to women's bodies are both secured under the same terms.

Political theorist Carole Pateman argues that this fraternal masculine sex-right to women's bodies is foundational but obscured within social contract theory itself, and that the genesis of modern political rights, including notions of freedom and equality, is not merely a social contract between men but also sexual contract that entails the unequal status of women. "Patriarchy ceased to be paternal long ago. Modern civil society is not structured by kinship and the power of fathers; in the modern world, women are subordinated to men *as men*, or to men as a fraternity. The original contract takes place after the political defeat of the father and creates modern *fraternal patriarchy*" (Pateman 1988, 3). Enduring fraternal patriarchy is endemic to political notions of freedom and civil rights—in *liberte, egalite, fraternite*, fraternity is not merely a metaphor universally applicable to include all individuals in a community. It is a brotherhood of men. Lynn Hunt's (1992) cultural and historical analysis in *The Family Romance of the French Revolution* departs from Pateman's

analysis of revolutionary social contractualism more generally. Hunt argues that

liberte, egalite, and fraternite, similarly entailed a new form of subordination of

women, but one that proceeded from the unintended potential culturally created by

the revolution that women *could* be included in that new universal understanding of

brotherhood, and ought not to be. However, regardless of theoretical potentialities

created, in both accounts, notions of freedom, progressive power, and modern

fraternal forms of patriarchy do not emerge as opposites but simultaneously. They are

deeply, culturally entangled social formations.

Conclusion

I have a meeting to do an interview with Mateo, a Latinx head of marketing

for a tech startup, who I met from a basic income meetup in San Francisco. We are

meeting close to his office in Mountain View at a coffee shop I frequent to write up

fieldnotes. It's a popular spot for technologists to work in the area. In my previous

experiences writing up fieldnotes there, I noticed a recurring workshop for people

training to interview for jobs at Google, and overheard several conversations about

the inception of new technology ideas. Today, I overhear two young men. One with a

French accent is seemingly giving advice to the other about how to get his startup off

the ground. They both look to be in their 30s, casually dressed in tank tops and shorts.

The one advising gushes about "hanging out with silverbacks" on his recent trip to

Rwanda, before they transition the conversation back to business. The younger says

he is interested in building a "social media environment suitable for creatives." The

adviser explains, "Yeah just know that you're building *value*… you're like a mercenary icon, you see this thing that you need to build and then you're like, oh it's gonna take this many hours, and you're like, duh duh duh [imitates gun shots] set the clock." A typical overheard in Mountain View conversation. I'm not the only one who comes here to eavesdrop on others' conversations. I notice two women speaking at a table. They've boxed themselves ¾ of the way in with 7ft tall, sturdy, black egg crate foam—an acoustic isolation device to prevent eavesdropping.

Mateo arrives and I conduct the interview, listening with great interest, taking notes, reflecting on what's been said in order to confirm my understanding and elicit more elaboration in his responses. When the interview concludes, a white man who looks to be in his mid 30s wearing a hackathon t-shirt leans in. (The hackathon shirt is a standard souvenir for participants in these kinds of events, the hackathon tee is ubiquitous among a certain type of technologist). He says, "Excuse me, I just have to ask, what app did you guys use?" I look back, puzzled. He continues, "it sounds like you guys are having a really great date. What app did you meet on?" I tersely respond for the sake of all listening, "This is not a date." As if to soften my reply, Mateo quickly says, "I've been using Hinge." He proceeds to show the eavesdropper the dating app on his phone. Meanwhile, I cannot help but notice what caught his attention. The ideal heterosexual date for this man was the form of my ethnographic interview: the woman asks all the questions, does all the active listening, persists in learning more from the man, reflects and deeply empathizes with the experience of the interviewee with no expectation of, or desire for, these energies to be

reciprocated. Everything the man says is important enough to be met with a steady stream of interest, affirmation, follow up questions, and even vigilant note-taking.

I mentioned this incident of misrecognition to Amber. "That's so typical," she said. "It reminds me, I just had another VC hosting a party ask me to bring women 'not in tech.' That's what he said. It's code. These types of men only want to date school teachers and waitresses—not that there's anything wrong with being a school teacher," she quickly says, possibly remembering that I sometimes identify myself as a teacher. "It's not about tech itself, but that I make good money. They want someone who depends on them, and depends on their career, so they'll have to be in *that* position with them, they have to listen to them." She adds, "I shouldn't make too many generalizations about 'tech bros,' I know there are plenty of sweet, normal guys who just happen to be working in tech." She paused, then continues, "I just don't encounter many of them." This socialization made her incredibly attuned to how sexualized the hierarchies of auditory entitlement and class are in this cultural milieu.

Donna Haraway (1984) theorized the silverback as an icon of "teddy bear patriarchy," except a dead one erected in the American Museum of Natural History, speaks to the enduring forms of American patriarchy. From the man's stoked retelling of his gorilla trekking trip "hanging out" with silverbacks—dominant, mature, male gorillas, who are ever more subject to human encounters as their habitat is threatened by warfare and deforestation—resonates a similar disfiguring of relationality that happens in the workplace where sexual harassment of women by men is normalized. One person's relational conditions of enduring are another person's playground, an

148

opportunity to feel freedom, American masculinity is constituted in this ability to presume that *my pleasure* is for the greater good.

The work as freedom culture of Silicon Valley leverages a progress narrative that obscures the actual workings of power. In chapter 5, I demonstrate how this narrative alignment with progress obscures power dynamics in housing and real estate. In this chapter, I have been particularly interested in how it facilitates fraternal patriarchy as a power dynamics within the workplace, and that encompasses tech culture in Silicon Valley more broadly. The legacy of intentional communities within today's tech utopianism, combined with the intensifying affects of cult- and kin- like startups, both contribute to a sexual progress narrative that obscures a culture of fraternal patriarchy. Historically, we might even expect to see this time and again because fraternal patriarchy, in social contract theory and in psychoanalytic theory, is itself a progress narrative.

The implicit regional metanarrative of the revolutionary potential of tech capitalism is couched in familial imaginaries that pull at both its descendance from intentional communities and from the broader modernization of workplace relations. But its self-fashioning as egalitarian and freeing serves to disguise ways in which startup workplace relations are anything but. This is only further entrenched by a strawman that is both an icon of a business model and a model of gender inequality that tech supposedly departs from: paternal patriarchy. These frat-like startups, with the zeal of intentional communities formed to change the world, envision themselves as revolutionizing hierarchical offices ruled by authoritarian bosses to offer us

149

freedom through work amongst equals held together by affective ties instead of arbitrary authority. It is within this cultural framework that they appear as progressive, the opposite of patriarchal in its parochial, father-led form—to themselves and to broader American culture. In the new way of working, they collaborate amongst equals to encourage real creativity. The fraternal patriarchy that follows then feels like a scandalous surprise, instead of the predictable outcome of a group of men, gaining new power through changing the world, and what they believe that entitles them to. When viewed through the lens of *fraternal* patriarchy, the symbiotic relationship between a revolutionary "movement" (in Michael's words) for better work and the frat-like conditions of participation become more apparent.

The legacy of the intentional communities within tech startups as progressive forms of relatedness only further entrenches the problem, as sexual harassment at work runs counter to the dominant narratives of work as freedom. The entitlement of male coworkers to Amber's body, whether by pulling her into their laps or by drugging her, cannot exist alongside the image of the benevolent family, and the ability to trust that these work relations are good for her. Analyzing these dynamics as an instance of fraternal patriarchy makes clear how progressive freedom and masculine entitlement to sexual access emerge in tandem, time and again. American cultural notions of freedom, through work or through hetero-patriarchal sex, are intimately entangled with fraternal patriarchy, which normalizes both masculine dominance within personal life of families and entitlement to women's bodies in civil society, the intentional community in which we are all supposed to be equals.

CHAPTER 5

Economies of ignorance:

Dark data, platform companies, and the public imagination

During my fieldwork, my partner and I were living in an approximately 500 sq. foot studio in Beach Hill with our two cats. It was cramped, so we occasionally scanned listings for slightly bigger rentals that were still within our graduate student budget. It was rare that one came up, but when they did, competition was fierce. We attended an open house for one that was just slightly out of budget in the residential neighborhood of the West Side of Santa Cruz. These properties were typically more expensive as they were distanced from commercial developments and the scenic ocean side road, West Cliff, was within walking distance. We entered the house, and the chatty property owner, a middle aged white woman, told us she had recently sold one of the two houses she owned on the block. Amused with the story, she enthusiastically shared, "first day it was on the market, we got an offer that was 10 thousand above the asking price. And we were like, well, that's great. But then within 2 days we had a counter-offer for 20 thousand above the asking price!" The bidder, a man who worked at Netflix, had already bought a house on the same block. He claimed the second house was for his parents to visit. For the bid and the location, it was unlikely he was going to let it be vacant for the majority of the year—it was almost certainly going to be converted into a short-term vacation rental.

This chapter examines how one set of startups, short-term vacation rental (STVR) platforms, are impacting the interface between home and work beyond their

own offices through the technology itself. The recruitment of the home for the production of financial value observed in Chapter 2 appears again here, but in a different way and with profoundly different consequences, one of which is the production of big data relevant to cities. In this chapter, I examine how the generation and management of massive amounts of user data changes the political landscape by transforming public understandings of what constitutes knowledge and nonknowledge. I look at how these shifts in everyday epistemology are being exploited by STVR platform companies, such as Airbnb and VRBO. In line with Silicon Valley's progressive ethos, these companies have fostered a public image and presence for their data-producing platform while also litigiously withholding the data they produce from local governments. I argue that this amalgam of knowledge and ignorance has impacted political efforts to regulate these companies by actively cultivating and shaping techno-optimistic political imaginaries.

First, I describe the structure of the Airbnb platform, its role in performatively creating a speculative STVR market, and how its iterations encode obfuscation and regulatory evasion into the design of the platform itself. Next, I analyze the company's methods for simultaneously cultivating knowledge and ignorance in the public imagination surrounding its relationship to big data. Through both its public relations campaigns and its design, Airbnb convinces the public that it alone has access to the data that can determine the scale and distribution of STVR activity, while also refusing to release that data. Drawing on fieldwork conducted in a city-level regulatory subcommittee, I show that the data produced by STVR activity

facilitates an ever-retreating political horizon for regulatory action. It enables a politics of deferral, of action through inaction, which produces recommendations for lax and ineffective STVR regulations. This is also, I argue, a politics of techno-optimism, which Silicon Valley promotes: a tautological belief that technology can solve social problems.

Just 90 miles south of San Francisco and one of the closest beach towns to Silicon Valley, the relatively small city of Santa Cruz has become a commuter town and weekend destination for many involved in the technology economy. I volunteered and was selected to participate in a city council-convened subcommittee to develop recommendations for the regulation of STVRs. During this time, I observed how privatized data impacted regulatory processes. This was, in part, due to the actions of companies themselves, which simultaneously gesture toward the superior accuracy of their data in public relations and withhold data from local governments. However, it was also due to the common knowledge that platform companies produced and managed data on millions of users, combined with ignorance of that data. This condition—simultaneous knowledge and ignorance of data produced by digital monitoring—led the majority of residents involved in these discussions to marginalize local knowledge produced by the city, tenants and individuals on the subcommittee, along with other research on STVR companies. Analyzing the events of STVR platform regulation in Santa Cruz provides insights into broader questions about the political horizons (Gould 2009) produced by contemporary conditions of platform capitalism. As platform companies' mass surveillance of digital activity

simultaneously becomes public knowledge (we are generally aware of these activities) and manufactured ignorance (the actual algorithms that enable data collection and the information that could be gleaned remains the private property of the companies themselves), how does this impact political discourse and ultimately the ability to regulate technology companies? I find that ignorance and awareness of data, promoted by technology companies, produces techno-optimism as part of the political horizon. This combination of optimism and ignorance is then leveraged by companies to promote an attachment to the idea of unobtainable raw data, or dark data, as a precondition for effective political action. In this techno-optimistic frame, political solutions become a matter of accessing technology and data that is never quite accessible, and so action must be deferred.

Figures of Fantasy

My account of dark data as part of a new political imaginary builds on existing literature in anthropology, science and technology studies, and critical data studies. Recent scholarship has tried to explain the role of data within digital capitalism as a collection of value-producing activity. Some focus on the structural power asymmetries between the users whose everyday actions generate data and the institutions that monitor, harvest, and control it, and suggest that networked activity is labor (see Terranova 2000; Qiu, Gregg, and Crawford 2014). Others suggest data are not outcomes of free labor so much as the "raw material" for extraction (Srnicek 2016).

Work in data studies theorizes the nature of data as a socially produced object. Following Foucault's (1977) now canonical studies that reveal knowledge production as a site for generating power relations, data studies scholars have criticized the concept of "raw data," the idea that data exist without human intervention in some pre-representational form. The concept of raw data is an oxymoron, they argue, because data must be *imagined* as such for it to exist (Gitelman and Jackson 2013). A central insight that emerges from this diverse interdisciplinary subfield of critical data studies in particular and science studies more broadly is that data are not pre-social reflections of reality, or measures of ontologically autonomous objects. Rather, data are the outcome of semiotic, material, social, political, and infrastructural assemblages, constituted by human labor, both visible and invisible (see Star and Strauss 1999).

In other words, "there are no data behind the various practices that *do* data" (Biruk 2018, 44). Along those lines, ethnographies in science studies and anthropology have examined the labor of constructing and "cooking" data, from scientists in the laboratory to demographers in the field (Latour and Woolgar 1979; Biruk 2018). Some have complicated the figure of "raw data" by characterizing the labor of extracting data as a process of "rawification" in which subjects understand their data labor as "the very condition under which raw data could exist" (Denis and Goëta 2017, 620). Other scholars turn from the social labor of data production itself to examine the material objects that present data. Hull (2012) argues that bureaucratic documents, presentations, charts and graphs play an active role in constructing

meaning and are not just vehicles for the information they contain. Hull writes, "We need to see graphic artifacts not as neutral purveyors of discourse, but as mediators that shape the significance of the linguistic signs inscribed on them" (2012, 13).

Numbers themselves are not empty signifiers but persuasive representations of reality (Poovey 1998), and as social studies of finance suggest, representations of quantitative data performatively create a reality they purport to merely reflect (Callon and Muniesa 2005; A. Mackenzie 2005; D. Mackenzie 2006; Ho 2009; Holmes 2013). Callon and Muniesa write:

> [C]alculating does not necessarily mean performing mathematical or even numerical operations…. Calculation starts by establishing distinctions between things or states of the world, and by imagining and estimating courses of action associated with those things or with those states as well as their consequences" (2005, 1231).

In other words, the imagination of things as discrete, quantifiable, and potentially in circulation, is both the social pre-condition for and the process entailed in calculation and markets.[14] This processual link between imagination, calculation, and economic markets is perhaps especially tangible in digital platforms produced iteratively through coding cultures of circulation (A. Mackenzie 2005). While knowledge-power studies demonstrated that there is no pre-social existence of raw data, unmodified and free of human intervention, anthropologists and data studies scholars point out that

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[14] The very language used to describe economic phenomena, such as *market, goods, supply and demand*, are themselves a modality of economic constitution. For challenges to these terms, see Callon (2016) and Guyer (2016).

the *idea* of raw data cannot be easily dismissed, because it continues to do things in the world. This idea can dehistoricize worldly phenomena and naturalize points of view by making the conditions of data production invisible, or reinforce existing social orderings and hierarchies by converting dimensions of life into apparently neutral quantitative categories.

Political appeals to and calls for raw data are thus related to the emergence of modern technocracy, in which technoscientific discourses arguably occupy the space of sovereign authority as self-legitimating and beyond public deliberation (see Arendt 1958) even as, symbolically, raw data represents a liberal utopianism. Indeed, the demand for raw data is often linked with the political demand for transparency, defined as the goal of making relevant data available to citizens or stakeholders before it is "cooked" into a narrative that is convenient for officials. These calls for transparency are predicated not merely on the belief in "raw data" itself, but also on a techno-optimistic confidence in the power of raw data to provide an antidote to the all-too-human tendency to suppress or manipulate information for self-interested ends. In William Mazzarella's terms, this optimistic attachment to or belief in the deliverance of justice by raw data exhibits a "politics of immediation," or "a political practice that, in the name of immediacy and transparency, occludes the potentialities and contingencies embedded in the mediations that comprise and enable social life" (2006, 476). Immediacy here does not refer to temporal urgency but to the "illusion of a pre-mediated existence… [an illusion that is] at once the outcome of mediation and the means of its occlusion" (William Mazzarella 2009, 303). Raw data is thus one of

many "great utopian figure[s] of immediacy," that perform and mobilize politics through erasure, when in fact data are in themselves sites for political action both by those in power and from below (W. Mazzarella 2006, 476).

Importantly, the concept of figures of immediation emphasizes that data are also figures of public imagination. Boyd and Crawford consider the ideological valences and mythologies mobilized by the figure of "big data". They argue that technology and analytics are only one part of the big data story; equally important is "the widespread belief that large data sets offer a higher form of intelligence and knowledge that can generate insights that were previously impossible, with the aura of truth, objectivity, and accuracy" (2012, 663). The imagined magnitude of big data is charismatically persuasive, influencing belief at the level of affect and impression. While theorizing the relationship between data infrastructures and a public as an asymmetry is valuable for describing power differences, for example, by identifying how worker management can be embedded in design (see Rosenblat and Stark 2016), calling it asymmetrical can imply a goal of equalizing an imbalance that falls into the trap of the politics of immediation. It suggests that power dynamics between workers and companies can be rectified through information symmetry or transparency.

Andrejevic and Burdon (2015) introduce the concept of the "sensor society" to describe a world in which data passively collected through ubiquitous networked sensor devices goes far beyond any user's direct, intentional interaction with those devices. For them, there is an inherent asymmetry between the user and the private firms that control the infrastructure of sensor-captured data. The notion of "a sensor

159

society" emphasizes the emergent public or common sense-making that this chapter further analyzes. The public has a growing awareness and participation in large-scale privatized digital infrastructures that constantly monitor and produce mass intimacy with these data-harvesting processes through ubiquitous, everyday mediations, such as the presentation of "personalized" search results. This mass intimacy is a form of knowledge through common-sense.

At the same time, privatized digital infrastructures and the mythological "bigness" of big data itself also produce an intimately felt ignorance of these very processes. This state of simultaneous knowledge and ignorance in relation to data requires theorization in itself. As Proctor (2008) argues, ignorance is not necessarily natural state, nor a vacuum of knowledge waiting to be filled; ignorance can be patterned, institutionally embedded, and manufactured through power structures in society. As such, the data-ignorance produced by platform companies is a part of the "structure of feeling" (Williams 1977) or "emotional habitus" (Gould 2009) arising from the conditions of a sensor society. "Emotional habitus" refers to how affects, feelings, and emotions, in addition to the material conditions of society, shape and constrain the political horizon of what is imaginable and possible (Gould 2009, 32–39). I understand and employ techno-optimism to mean an affective condition shaping political horizons, in which the only imaginable political actions are technological solutions or contingent on technological access, which frames political problems as ultimately technological problems. Following Proctor and Schiebinger's (2008) call to develop "agnotology", or the study of ignorance, I suggest the term

dark data to characterize and analyze this formation of data-awareness and -ignorance specific to the habitus of sensor societies that entails and affords mainly techno-optimistic imaginaries.

Dark data is a concept used by open-source activists to refer to data sets that are known to exist in some form but that either cannot be found or are found in too inscrutable a form to analyze. As one open-source activist explains, "It's like dark matter; we know it must there be but we don't know where to find it to verify" (Harmon 2017). Dark data also resonates with the term "dark pattern"—which, in user experience (UX) industry discourse, refers to a way of exploiting user ignorance with an "interface that has been carefully crafted to trick users into doing things" (Brignull 2014). I use *dark data* not only refer to this category of big data, but also to the "common sense" figure of data that has an imagined omnipotent quality. Especially to the average networked subject, who is a participant in platform economies but has no special technical knowledge or access, dark data wields privileged truth-telling capacities and higher forms of objectivity, with its appearance of rational, but simultaneously unknowable, calculation. My adaptation of *dark data* is thus meant to build on the existing data studies literature by providing a name for the fantasy figure itself, like raw data, but which is also tied to the material reality of private data with a public life. Data has long existed data outside the realm of knowability not least for those staring straight at it—but with the rise of always-on ubiquitous computing and data infrastructure activity in daily life, this emergent form of ignorance takes on a broader scale and political significance. Naming the object,

161

dark data, makes visible the political work that privatized data do by virtue of their impact on the public imagination.

Naturalizing Ignorance

Short-term vacation rental (STVR) platform companies cultivate both public awareness of their data sets and public ignorance of any actual content. They actively obscure data on public-facing websites, turning data that is a known condition of its operation, such as addresses, usage, and revenue, into dark data. For example, Airbnb, the company that has the largest market share, shows a map of a listing's neighborhood publicly and ultimately communicates the address once a listing is booked, but it does not display exact addresses publicly. Much to regulators' frustration, the company also scrubs, or automatically detects and deletes, language from listings that resembles permitting language. This data-scrubbing practice makes it nearly impossible to enforce city ordinances that require STVRs have and display permits to operate. There are no profile pages to easily distinguish if a landlord has multiple listings in one city, which would indicate a commercial operator as opposed to an individual "mom and pop" landlord occasionally renting out a room in their full-time residence. Further detailed data about a listing's usage, such as the number of days a year it is offered, rented, and whether it is used as a primary residence when not rented, is also dark data to the public, not disclosed by the companies.

These encoded forms of ignorance demonstrate how STVR companies anticipate and evade political regulation as a necessary aspect of their ongoing

existence. It is necessary not only because local governments might wish to restrict operations of STVRs and constrain the market, but also because the popularity of STVR platforms stems in large part from the affordability of short-term rentals compared to hotels. Hotels are subject to zoning and permitting laws, taxes, health and safety standards and ADA compliance, among other costs of regulatory compliance. Many STVRs operate in residentially-zoned areas, where they can successfully avoid most, if not all, of these costs, and might not be offered at the same price-point if they were subject to the same regulations as hotels. This slippery relation to the law is intrinsic to the STVR company business model and intrinsic to the coding of company platforms. Consequently, there is no "immediated" (Mazzarella 2009) STVR usage—no naturally-occurring, pre-interpretation STVR data sets—that exist prior to the companies' slippery relation to local laws. In each new coded iteration of the platform, and through the impact it has on the price and desirability of listing, this evasive relation is embedded in the mediation itself. Any presumption of the natural or raw state of the dark data produced by STVR usage conceals these political conditions of possibility. Dark data does political work by securing this zone of naturalization: as long as data production and data sets lie beyond knowability, the image of data as pre-political phenomenon can be maintained.

Dark data and obligatory data-sharing has been at the crux of political struggles between city governments, organized residents, and STVR platform companies. In New York City, Airbnb's largest U.S. market, the Mayor's Office of

Special Enforcement (OSE) has issued subpoenas to Airbnb dating back to 2011 for data about hosts, listings, and reservations, which have been challenged by Airbnb, and City Council has passed laws requiring STVR sites to provide names and addresses to OSE on a monthly basis. In countersuits, Airbnb and Homeaway argued that they could not turn over data without violating the privacy of users—a refusal which also served the purpose of evading the kind of public knowledge that might facilitate regulation. In 2016, Airbnb began claiming that it would manually remove hosts with multiple listings in San Francisco and New York to crack down on commercial operators, but there is no codified policy across the platform and there is no oversight of how thoroughly this ban has been implemented, if at all (Said 2016). The expectation that data-sharing will enable regulation and enforcement has led organized residents to pressure city governments to obtain this information. Echoing other data transparency movements, #ReleaseTheData campaigns have pressured local governments to demand that STVR companies turn over their data. Without diminishing the efficacy or importance of the campaign, I would point out here that even campaigns aimed at regulating STVR companies have a techno-optimistic understanding of power by presuming that data-sharing in itself will bring about the desired political end.

Airbnb and Homeaway in particular have filed countersuits to cities' attempts at regulation through lawsuits and subpoenas in San Francisco and New York, the two biggest STVR markets in the U.S. When New York Attorney General Eric Schneiderman issued a subpoena for Airbnb's data on its hosts, Airbnb first

challenged that subpoena in courts, then released data that was found by independent data-scrapers to be inaccurate. Airbnb then admitted that it deleted 1,500 listings before turning over this data, claiming it was part of a regular purge of illegal listings, although a survey of its listings from year prior and immediately after shows this was not a routine procedure (Plitt 2016). The fact that Airbnb turned over inaccurate and incomplete data for public scrutiny does not undermine the techno-optimistic attachment to transparency and data-sharing, however. Rather it reinforces the idea that objectivity might yet be found in the dark data that is imagined to exist on the Airbnb servers, if we could only get a hold of it in its raw form. Indeed, the city's battle to obtain Airbnb's proprietary data cements its authoritative status relative to other possible forms of public knowledge production. The legal back-and-forth between New York City and Airbnb continues. In the summer of 2018, Airbnb and Homeaway filed suit against the city for a recent city council ruling that STVR companies must turn over host data, citing privacy concerns (Zaleski and De Vynck 2018).

From the way platform companies like Airbnb use, selectively disclose, and withhold data in their public relations, they appear to be aware of its political potential for introducing uncertainty and of the value of pointing to its authoritative status, which is maintained by its privacy. Such performances demonstrate an instance in which powerful companies promote and articulate techno-optimism which artificially separates regulation from their platform technology, producing an notion of the purity of data as a political goal. One might suspect that this game of hide and

seek would make residents more suspicious of the data and what they might mean. In the case of Santa Cruz, it had the opposite effect.

Data-Enabled Speculation: Arbitraging Knowns and Unknowns

STVR companies may have begun with a relatively simple business model, but the innovation that constitutes a significant part of their business is contingent on the new ways in which they financialize residential space. STVR platforms actively create new avenues of real estate speculation by making these avenues newly calculable. Debates about Airbnb's effect on the housing market center on number of rental units converted vs. number of units built, or supply and demand calculations that presume a market entails the exchange of commodities that pre-exist that exchange in some way. However, the disruption that STVR platforms make in the rental market, and in people's lives, is not merely about supply and demand but about potentiality, or the more lucrative futures that these platforms materialize. As economic anthropology and the social studies of finance have argued, commodities and markets do not pre-exist or exist outside the imaginative and technological means to make calculations, as standard supply and demand understandings would have it, but are enacted in the process through an assemblage of human and non-human actors (see Mitchell 2002; Zaloom 2003; Miyazaki 2005; Callon and Muniesa 2005; A. Mackenzie 2005; D. Mackenzie 2006; Riles 2011). Technological innovations, such as information technology platforms, together with new imaginative innovations in the ability to represent and calculate (the data provided by platforms and the

algorithms involved in their production) simultaneously perform and constitute the STVR market that they purport to only describe or mediate. In short, these platform companies are impeccable examples of the startup world's cultural force towards financialization in that they performatively create speculative markets that alter the dynamics of long-term rents and real estate. The remaking of life around financial value observed in Chapter 2 within the startup itself lends itself easily towards creating speculative markets through platforms as well: startups that envision their own homes through work, and through speculative valuation, simply apply this vision outwards to find untapped speculative markets everywhere.

STVR platform companies do not do this in isolation: a whole cottage industry of assessors has cropped up around data-scraping the numbers made available. While companies produce dark data, the data that are available publicly on the website are scraped by market researchers in ways that give rise to rental speculation and ultimately benefit STVR companies by demonstrating the immense profitability of STVR conversion. Data-scraping refers to the process of extracting data from one database, website, or program, into another. It could involve manually copying and pasting the available data from a website into a spreadsheet, and indeed many low-waged data-entry jobs involve just that. However, it also refers to the programmed processes of identifying, transferring, and compiling data to produce another data set. For a website like Airbnb, scrapable data includes the coordinates of the map approximating the location of the rental, dates the rental is available or unavailable, how much it is being charged for at a given date, and any images

167

included. Data-scraping entails this labor. AirDNA is an STVR market research company that uses scraped data to create city-specific reports on STVR patterns of profitability. In addition to long-term trends, annual revenue of rentals, and popularity, these reports analyze which rentals create the most revenue, providing insights both through specific listings and through comparisons (for example, 1 bedroom rentals vs. 2 bedroom). The data are both descriptive and performative. This double function of AirDNA data is reflected in this chapter as well.

An AirDNA report was provided to the Santa Cruz STVR subcommittee. In Santa Cruz, short-term rentals can produce upwards of 4 times the annual revenue that long-term rentals can produce for property owners.[15] AirDNA CEO Scott Shatford calls the practice of converting rents to exploit the vast difference between long-term and short-term rental income "rental arbitrage" (Shatford 2015). Arbitrage is a practice in finance in which identical commodities can be bought and sold for different prices, creating an opportunity for financial gain without any process of production other than the ability to move markets or recalculate value (in finance, this is often done through derivatives). These numbers figure into the property value itself, which in turn raises the price of long-term rent. It is not simply the proportion of housing units that were being converted from long-term into short-term, but the potentiality such STVR platforms and the calculations made possible by scrapable data that impacts the price of rent. The speculations created by arbitrage calculations

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[15] This figure was found by comparing the market rent for a 2-bedroom apartment in Santa Cruz (Greenberg and McKay 2017) to the median price per night of a 2-bedroom STVR on AirDna (AirDNA 2015).

affect the present rental housing stock by raising the bar for long-term tenants, in turn incentivizing rental arbitrage. Some scholars call this dynamic a "rent gap" (Smith 1987), which has been found to be produced by STVR growth in other cities experiencing a housing crisis as well, like New York City (BJH Advisors 2016; Stringer 2018; Wachsmuth and Weisler 2018).

Persuasions of Progress

While rental arbitrage created by STVR platforms contributes to rising rents for long-term tenants, this is not the story publicly told about STVR companies. Airbnb, by far the most successful company, brands itself as a palliative option to rent-burdened residents. Disavowing the former practice and forming an identity through the latter has been central to Airbnb's public image, an image made tenable through dark data. The CEO of Airbnb, Brian Chesky, said in an interview, "There were substantive problems, a phenomenon that occurred where landlords saw they could make a lot of money taking units off the market and renting them on a short-term basis. Though I think the scope of this was overstated on our platform, this was a problem, and people were doing this. We were a little behind on this and we had to play catch up" (Ting 2017). Airbnb has maintained an image, like many information technology companies that run independent contracting platforms, that it helps the struggling middle class. Airbnb's policy managers say their users are just trying to "make ends meet" (Ferré-Sadurní 2018) and press releases in response to restrictive policies often emphasize how restrictions hurt "the typical middle class host" and

169

"middle class families" (Ting 2016). Airbnb also operates a website called *Airbnb*
Citizen, which highlights positive news for the "host community" and profiles hosts
who are individuals, often with other full-time jobs, who rent out individual rooms.
This is incongruous with the type of rentals producing the most revenue from Airbnb
listings, which are property management companies like Niido grossing in the
millions of dollars (Sisson 2018). The AirDna report also demonstrates that the
majority of activity on STVR platforms comes not from single rooms in a shared
apartment but from entire houses in Santa Cruz: 65% of Airbnb's revenue in Santa
Cruz comes from entire houses as opposed to "hosted" rentals or individual rooms in
an owner-occupied residence. However, by highlighting its middle-class "host
community" as opposed to multiple-property-owning landlords, Airbnb promotes an
image of itself as a support system to struggling tenants against the very conditions of
unaffordable rent that Airbnb's new avenues of speculation exacerbate. This is
techno-optimism in action: a tautological imaginary in which the technology
companies facilitating the problem also appear as innovative solutions on the political
horizon.

This progress narrative in which Airbnb is a palliative option for a financially
burdened middle class guards Airbnb against political mobilization and positions it as
the solution, even among residents who had a direct interest in its regulation. As I
surveyed local residents, neighbors, friends, and local business owners, many people
cited Airbnb's presumed benefit for the struggling middle class as a reason not to
attempt to regulate STVRs. This appeal even outweighed a direct economic interest in

restriction. One informant, Adriana, owns and operates a registered and permitted bed and breakfast by the beach; she enjoys conversations with new people and welcomed me as her neighbor for a free homemade breakfast several times. When asked if she would support restrictions, Adriana responded unequivocally: "No, because I hear there are people who cannot afford to live here, but they rent out their room a couple times a week on Airbnb, and just that little bit is enough to get them by." Adriana's response is a perfect example of how companies' efforts to cultivate their own techno-optimistic progress narratives successfully impact the political desire to regulate them. The perception that Airbnb is primarily a business that assisted struggling tenants, rather than contributing to the rising rents that created economic pressures in the first place, protects the platform companies, which incorporate what might otherwise be critical sentiments into a positive public image.

Other tenant-rights activists in the local community were interested in organizing for an ordinance that would distinguish between hosted rentals, or owner-occupied, and non-hosted rentals, entire houses or apartment units where the owner was not sharing space, to defend what they thought of as a crucial and important benefit of STVR platforms to struggling middle classes. This is often the impetus behind ordinances that restrict STVRs with a number of days per year limit, although enforcement depends on unobtainable usage information, resurfacing dark data yet again. A tenant organizing activist recommended that the city try and impose a prohibitively high tax on rentals operating over 30 days, even after learning that such a distinction requires usage data that we did not have access to. He, like many other

rent-burdened residents searching for political strategies, arrived at the same question, "can't we just make Airbnb give us their data?" The dark data remained the starting point for imagining political solutions. The combination of imagined possibility and limit produced by dark data repeated itself with numerous other residents organizing for STVR expansion, reifying public ignorance, and the authority of dark data, each time. Despite evidence to the contrary, housing rights activists would return to the notion that somehow residents could work with STVR companies use their data towards political ends. Dark data enables and fuels the production of the techno-optimistic fantasy by occupying the imaginative space where creative political problem-solving conversations begin and end.

The Santa Cruz Housing Crisis

In order to tell the story of STVR policymaking in Santa Cruz demonstrates how dark data impacts political discourse, this section provides background information on the other knowledge in circulation in Santa Cruz that was marginalized by dark data.

While dark data remained a fixation of political demands and deliberations, there existed substantial university- and city-generated data on the housing crisis in Santa Cruz that was marginalized in proceedings. Like many cities near the San Francisco Bay Area, Santa Cruz is experiencing a housing crisis, and the City Council convened the STVR committee to generate municipal regulatory recommendations to achieve two goals: 1) "preserve the long-term rental stock against conversion to short-

term rentals", and 2) "protect the character of neighborhoods." Participants applied and were selected to serve on the panel after a review process and a phone interview with the mayor. I was one of 3 tenants selected to be on the committee of 11, a ratio that inadequately represented the 56% of the city population who rents. Furthermore, 1 of the 3 tenants had a business managing short-term vacation rentals for people who owned a house in Santa Cruz that they rented out but lived elsewhere.

The STVR subcommittee was provided existing information that was directly or indirectly relevant to the issue of short-term rentals, including numbers from the city finance department, the city planning department, independent data-scrapers and industry analysts, news stories related to STVR companies, and sample ordinances from other cities.[16] Subcommittee members and community members brought even more information to meetings, including population studies, local news articles, or their own observations of what was happening in their neighborhood. Concerned residents wrote letters to the committee that were be distributed before each meeting. During the meetings, the two moderators, Scott and Ron from the city planning department, would ask each member what they thought about the information that was distributed that week, and towards the last few meetings, on the document that was slated to be the final report on the subcommittee proceedings.

The housing crisis was and is common knowledge, and undisputed. As Ron Powers, the City Planner said publicly, "We all know the city is in a housing crisis"

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[16] The contents of this binder can be individually downloaded online at http://www.cityofsantacruz.com/government/city-departments/planning-and-community-development/short-term-rentals/committee-history-short-term-rentals

(STVR subcommittee meeting, January 11, 2017). Nevertheless, evidence of a housing crisis was also supported by the information that was available. The rent was unaffordable by most measures (see Greenberg and McKay 2017). Median rent as a share of median income had gone up drastically in just a short time, from 26.2% in 2000 to 41.6% in 2013 (Dewan 2014). This had earned the City of Santa Cruz an international reputation as one of the most unaffordable cities for renters, with a report in *The Guardian* calling the rental market's displacement of residents "a catastrophe" (Levin 2016). Santa Cruz consistently ranks in the top 5 most unaffordable metropolitan areas in the country and is the second most expensive metropolitan area, according the Bureau of Economic Analysis study of regional price parity (Kiersz 2018).

The available information also strongly suggested that short-term vacation rentals were growing at a historically unprecedented rate in Santa Cruz. According to the Finance department, which only counts registered, transient-occupancy-tax (TOT) paying short-term units, there were 45 rentals in 2013. By 2016, there were 303. This growth is still only among registered, TOT-paying STVRs. The growth in the unregistered STVR market is even more staggering. According to a market report by AirDNA which had been included in our binders, as of July 2015, there were 421 total (both registered and unregistered) active listings in Santa Cruz. A recent

AirDNA search of active rentals in Santa Cruz finds 735 active rentals, 75% of which are entire home rentals (accessed August 31, 2018).[17]

Conversion Stories

As I asked local tenants about their experiences of the rental market, the stories of long-term rental conversion piled up fast. Anna, a tenant in her early 30s working for a local non-profit, rented a single bedroom in a 2-bedroom house on the West Side of Santa Cruz for several years. But when the property-owners sold the house, the buyers evicted her and her roommate, and turned the house into a short-term rental. She moved into a new, comparably sized room in another shared residence only 2 blocks away that was an additional $400/month in rent. In the predominantly Latinx part of town called the Beach Flats, another group of graduate students had been living in a property with one 3-bedroom house and two 1-bedroom units in the backyard. This arrangement of main dwelling and accessory dwelling units is common in Santa Cruz. All of them were evicted in 2016 for reasons the property owner claimed were "renovations." She later told one of the former tenants who she was friendly with that she hoped to list the units on Airbnb within the year. In the nearby neighborhood called Beach Hill, the owner of a group of studio units openly discussed evicting his tenants, starting with section 8 tenants who were struggling to find steady employment, to convert the units into Airbnb rentals. In an

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[17] This is in the small City of Santa Cruz, not the broader Watsonville-Santa Cruz County.

interview with a colleague, he glibly called it "social engineering" (Lawson and Kroopf 2016).

In addition to these eviction stories, real estate bidding wars like the one that introduces this chapter are a common story in Santa Cruz and in the San Francisco Bay Area in general. At one point during the STVR subcommittee proceedings, Ron, the city planner and moderator, who otherwise maintained a neutral facilitating role, interjected against the doubt expressed by one member that these bidding wars are due to STVR speculation: "I get phone calls all the time from people looking to buy properties to convert to short-term rentals asking me when the moratorium [on new STVR permit applications] will end." In another interview with a local real estate investor and resident who was also concerned about maintaining the city's character through affordable housing said that he sees real estate speculators buying up properties at astronomical rates frequently in Santa Cruz. Just that week, he said, "that property over on Logan St. in Lower Seabright, the one with the 3 small units and *no* yard space, just sold for 2 million. The *only* explanation is that they plan on making them into short-term rentals. It doesn't make sense any other way."

These stories are consistent with the mounting evidence from other cities that short-term rental conversion has significant impacts on the stability of home life for tenants, and on the housing and rental markets of cities where gentrification is already taking place. Emerging anthropological research on STVR platforms that focuses exclusively on the lives of property owners or managers, "hosts," and guests have a glaring gap: the voices of displaced tenants. Such research will entirely miss this

dynamic of displacement—the speculative conversion of homes into hotels, the added pressures it creates on already rent-burdened residents struggling with historic levels of wage stagnation—which is perhaps the most profound way in which STVR platforms transform urban cityscapes and homescapes.

Ignorance Inaction: Dark Data's Political Deferrals

The data performance by STVR platform companies, combined with public awareness of data-producing activities of platforms, impacts local regulatory processes by sustaining an image of unobtainable raw data against which all other knowledge appears cooked. Despite the substantial knowledge, information, and data in various forms demonstrating a significant uptick in unlicensed short-term rental listings since the popularization of STVR platforms companies, data the subcommittee did *not* have repeatedly cropped up to foreground our ignorance and argue for deferring action.

David, a former lawyer who described himself as enthusiastic about local government, said, "we haven't really got good data from which we can tell whether the impact of short-term rentals on the long-term rental market is statistically significant. We have a lot of anecdotal stuff but we really don't have good hard data that helps us drive a decision." There was data on the growth of STVRs, on the housing crisis, and clear figures that demonstrate the increased profitability of rental arbitrage. There was also anecdotal evidence from various sources, including the city planner, Ron, that the city had become a hotbed for non-resident STVR real estate

177

speculation. As most STVRs operated unlicensed, and only the companies themselves own data on unlicensed STVRs, the official numbers from the City Finance Department could not demonstrate this link in a way that was convincing to the majority of subcommittee members, although Ron's presentation certainly attempted to do so by pointing to indexical measures. Even though the city never stipulated that data demonstrating an existing causal connection was necessary to develop restrictions, David's comment placed dark data at the center of political action to ultimately justify inaction.

The rawness of data produced by the city, or lack thereof, also came into question as a marker of ignorance and reason for inaction. Another committee member, Khristina, a middle aged white woman who owned and operated a short-term rental on West Cliff, the most coveted residential street lining the ocean cliffs, said:

> I think it would be invaluable to simply report out the raw data... the full gamut of data in the purest form possible. … I think that the more you present the numbers in their pure form and the less verbiage attached to them, the less room there is for misunderstanding and misinterpretation… I'm a big fan of raw percentages… I'm a big fan of that form of empirical data represented graphically.

Aligning oneself and companies' dark data with pure objectivity as Khristina did worked to portray all other data as cooked, and therefore less reliable. Since the first meeting, Khristina proclaimed herself "a data person." The mythology that there

exists raw, pure, objective data, as opposed to biased data "cooked" with subjective interpretation, is sustained here by the ignorance of dark data. The pure data, that could only ever exist in the fantasy-form of dark data, emerges as an ideal that subjects optimistically attach to, casting doubt and suspicion on interpretative—which is to say, actually available and legible—forms of data.

The call to unpack data, or be presented with unobtainable data, was a recurring complaint from residents on the committee that suggests both a techno-optimistic faith in the immediacy of big data and the capabilities of platform data production to undermine other forms of knowledge production. At the second meeting on January 11, moderators asked us to respond to the information and objectives we had been given from City Council. Carole said, "I read through this [binder] cover to cover, and… I'm not sure that a problem exists." Property-owner Timerie commented, "We're talking about … saving the neighborhood, and… solving the housing crisis, and neither one of those are really an issue that short-term rentals have really created. The numbers are not really showing that and I'm not fully convinced." This claim that we were not given enough data or that numbers must— and failed to— show causality between short-term rental growth and the housing crisis in order to recommend restrictions prevailed through the process. At the last meeting, March 3, 2017, Khristina asserted "There's a built-in bias there [the objective that the subcommittee needs to focus on preserving the long-term rental housing stock] that I do not appreciate and that is that short-term rentals are taking long-term rentals off the market. I don't think that's true." Even the objectives, the

reasons for convening the subcommittee in the first place, were evidence of untrustworthiness of data from the city government.

The dynamic relationship between speculation and the rental market did not resonate with anyone. The image of a pre-existing STVR and long-term rental market ruled by supply and demand had a much stronger hold on people's imaginations. As a subcommittee member, I did not attempt to argue with this image because even by that measure, the numbers were actually showing short-term rentals growing at a much higher rate than the need for long-term rental housing. However, the data that we did not have because it was owned by Airbnb was referenced or pointed to frequently in these discussions to argue that since it could not be proven that short-term rentals were taking long-term rentals off the market, the city could not restrict them. It justified not only doubt of the problem itself, but a fixation on making the dark data visible and demonstrating the causality as a condition of political action. This framed the housing crisis, whatever its causes, as an inadequate justification to make long-term rental housing available in ways that the city legally could.

Because of the frequent conjuring of dark data by others, one committee member, a local landlord, hobbyist local historian, and licensed bed-and-breakfast operator in town named Brion, dedicated immense effort and time into an attempt to produce the dark data. Brion manually scraped data that was available and produced by in-person verifications data that was withheld by Airbnb and represented this data with graphs and maps (see images below). He would conduct a platform search like any user searching for a STVR in the city and would then identify the location of each

listing by matching the image of the house with either his direct knowledge of the

unit as a longtime resident, or an in-person or Google Image match. This data still

exists in a personal spreadsheet. He produced the following maps to demonstrate the

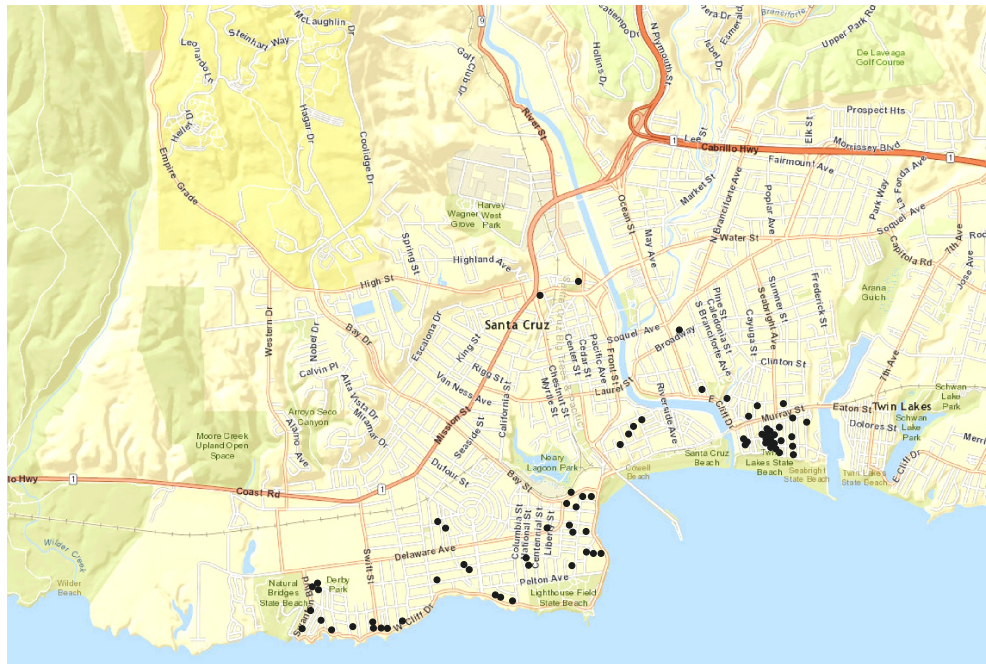growth of STVRs:

71 STR's as of January 1, 2014.

Figure 4: A map of STVRs in 2014. Image reproduced with permission from Brion Sprinsock.

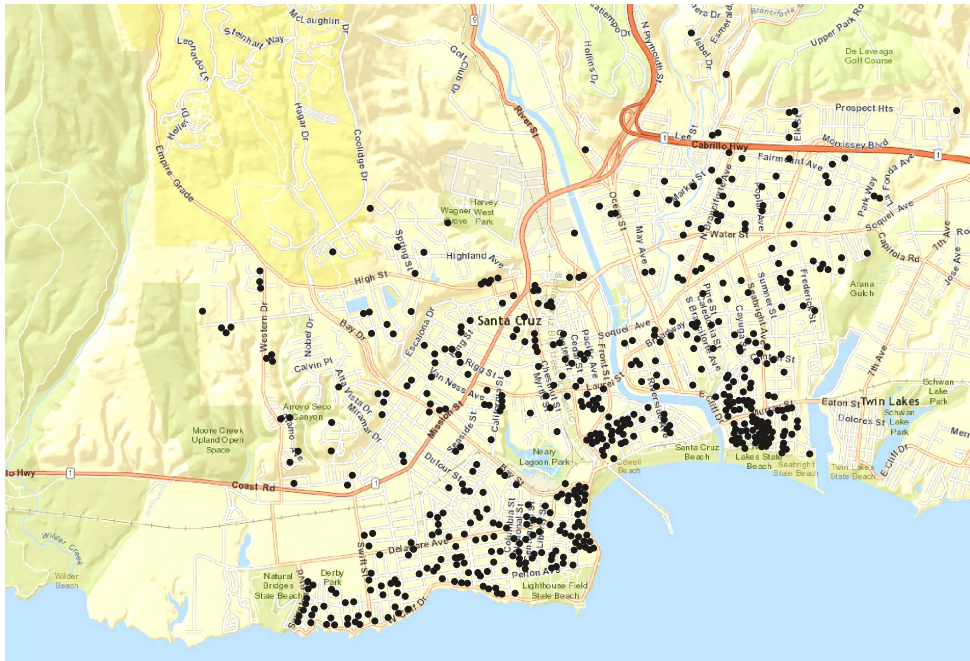## 572 STR Listings on Top 5 Online Sites as of May 11, 2017

Figure 5. Map of STVRs in 2017. Image reproduced with permission from Brion Sprinsock.

Since Brion was vocal about his opposition to STVRs, his data—which were remarkably similar in count and location to the data produced by AirDNA and the city—were dismissed by others on the committee as biased. This was in contrast to the attachment to unbiased dark data that could be supplied by Airbnb. Demonstrating techno-optimism at work in policymaking, the capabilities of dark data to represent truth first and foremost and bring forth political solutions was never questioned and, perhaps more importantly, never expected to be revealed. Participants shared the common knowledge that companies would track usage and that this data was true, final, and ultimately, the only acceptable baseline for political action.

Dark data also provided a means of sorting the legitimacy of knowledge-claims. Aligning with unobtainable data meant being on the side of rationality as opposed to emotion. Timerie, a middle-aged homeowner spoke about how she used to rent to long-term tenants before she needed to evict her tenant of 15 years, a local schoolteacher, to convert the unit to an STVR because she had to send her kids to private school. At one of the last meetings, Timerie said:

> people are still on this committee talking about their emotional connection to this topic… like, 'maybe there will be more housing, maybe not' [if short term rentals were restricted], like, we don't actually have that real information. There's all kinds of data and statistics that people are pulling for their own benefit but we haven't actually unpacked that for real.

The most abstract data—the dark data that we did not have and that we therefore had not unpacked— was more *real* than the data that we did have.

The missing data became an identity and identifying oneself with data an opportunity to perform one's objectivity and rationality, and concurrently, the irrationality or bias of dissent. Carole, another middle-aged homeowner who wanted to list her ADU on Airbnb, said, "We all have bias, we all have opinions that we want to support, but I'm a data person too." Such utterances, both referring to the unobtainable data, created a categorical division where the existing data was necessarily biased and opinionated in contrast to the objective truth of the dark data.

One might suspect that reference to the dark data was merely a deflection strategy for residents who had a vested financial interest in unrestricted STVR growth more than a genuine expression of uncertainty and unknowability. However, even people who supported restricting short-term rentals ended up deferring to missing data as a cause for inaction. In the February 8th meeting of the STVR subcommittee, the moderators asked if the city should limit the number of total permits for vacation rentals by either a percentage point or a total number of units. Karen is a homeowner who volunteered for the STVR subcommittee because was concerned about the residential character of her neighborhood, Lower Seabright. She disliked that, as she observed, so many nearby houses were STVRs. Her experience was also confirmed by the numbers: according to the city's official registry of existing, tax-paying units and Brion's unofficial maps of combined platform listings, Lower Seabright had the highest neighborhood density of STVRs in the city. Karen said, "I would love to limit, but I think that… we have *way* more [short-term vacation rentals] than we think we do, and I think that to set a number, we don't have enough information." This blockage created by dark data demonstrates that, regardless of the authenticity of each utterance, dark data ultimately impacted political discourse by maintaining the primacy of ignorance.

Between the direct experiences of residents, data that was supplied to us by the city, and the additional information that subcommittee members brought in or were sent each week, we had a plentitude of knowledge. But the shadow hanging over every piece of data presented, no matter how it was produced, was the data produced

by the companies themselves. Dark data was enacted not only as an absent presence in these proceedings but as the most authoritative, raw, and objective data. Dark data's recurring absent presence demonstrates one way in which the inability to know privatized big data, alongside the knowledge that it exists, works to undermine political efforts to regulate short-term rental companies by monopolizing the imaginative space of authoritative knowledge while simultaneously remaining out of reach. It was not simply that the data was "not yet known," or what Robert Proctor calls an "originary" state of ignorance, but the knowledge of this ignorance as well as its impenetrability is also what Proctor identifies as a "strategic ploy" produced by the companies public relations performances and structuring of the platform (2008, 3). The way in which dark data exists as both knowledge and ignorance enables the politics of immediation, that ultimately protect platform companies from further restriction.

More than just a rhetorical game, the effect of the dark data was an amplification of ignorance in participants' minds, despite even first-hand experiences that could build certainty about the phenomenon. At the end of the meeting that was supposed to be the last, after we had all spoken, the moderator Ron—the same city planner who stated plainly that there was a housing crisis and regularly received calls from real estate investors about when the moratorium would end— concluded, "we obviously need more data." It was decided that two more meetings were needed to discuss more data before making recommendations for restriction. Even though Santa Cruz technically had a temporary moratorium on expanding the number of STVRs,

since there was no way to enforce a prohibition on listing a property, this inaction was equivalent to allowing the exponential growth of short-term rentals to continue without restriction.

Dark data did not merely thwart public regulation through its imaginative function as a placeholder of ignorance; as actually-existing data, it was also used by companies to instantly mobilize local residents and alter policy-making discourse. Although all meetings were open to the public, the final meeting had the highest attendance. Dozens of residents showed up, wearing red. One of the platform companies sent an email to local short-term rental operators (what companies call "hosts") notifying them of the community meeting and encouraging them to show up, vocalize their opposition to STVR regulation, and wear red. This created the appearance of broad and unified public support for STVRs in Santa Cruz and highlighted the capacity of dark data as actually existing data to sway public discussion and impact policymaking. With access to their own large data sets, companies can mobilize their base of users with a financial stake in discussions, creating an astroturf movement with ease and rapidity that grassroots efforts struggle to compete with.

It is worth pointing out that the fixation on data we do not know and could not produce, to the detriment of all the existing data we do have, is even more confounding because Santa Cruz is not a big city. There are about 65,000 residents in the city of Santa Cruz. While one might expect some hesitation to generalize from this amount of evidence at a large city, it was surprising to find that dark data was

alienating residents from what, in some cases, was their direct experience and knowledge of the city they live in. This ability to undermine direct experience as knowledge speaks to the profound impact of dark data on public discourse.

Conclusion

Dark data is one of the ways information technology companies, whose digital platform product and business model are built on a slippery relation to law, manage to impact the public's ability to regulate them. Public awareness and ignorance of the constant monitoring and data-harvesting practices of platform companies, alongside the actions of companies, impacts policymaking at the scale of knowledge-formation. The flipside of mass intimacy with data-producing platforms is a networked public with an alienated epistemology. These are historically unprecedented conditions created by platform companies, which lead the public to defer not to the surveillance and knowledge of the state (as in previous regimes of surveillance) but to the knowledge of companies and their privately controlled means of data production. In a liberal democratic society in which the ideals of transparency and raw data obscure the socially-and politically-embedded nature of these data producing platforms in the first place, STVR companies such as Airbnb cultivate in dark data a public figure out of privatized raw data. At once referring to actually existing big data and imagined inaccessible data, dark data plays a role in policymaking discourse by cultivating a mistrust of other forms of knowledge and monopolizing political horizons. The capacity of dark data to thwart democratic policymaking is bolstered through

187

companies' actual usage of dark data to mobilize political bodies at a moment's notice. Although this chapter examined these effects in one small city, the process of dark data influencing and undermining political processes, and more broadly, of startups using technology to create platforms for the financialization of life, has implications on a much wider scale.

With the growth of the platform economy, technology companies and the data they produce play an ever-increasing role in the contemporary social and political landscape. It is the mythological side of big data that is "out there," humanly knowable, inhumanly knowledgeable and unobtainable, that gives rise to both a sense of uncertainty about one's own assessments of truth in the face of foregrounded ignorance, and to a faith in dark data's abilities to verify truth and legitimize knowledge claims. Ignorance, in this case, is not a natural state. Airbnb's encoded evasions demonstrate a deliberate curation of which data are available, which data are privately controlled, and which are be to scrubbed from public visibility. The shaping of ignorance and awareness is coded into the design of the platform and cultivated through public relation campaigns to achieve political ends. This fieldwork demonstrates the very real possibility that as platform companies simultaneously produce infrastructural scale phenomena and privatize the big data that mediate users' interaction with this infrastructure, dark data interrupts the ability to reliably know and imagine the reality of platform companies by other means.

Techno-utopian visions of government that envision the replacement of a government of humans by technological administration is by no means historically

new. What are new are the late capitalist conditions and development of rapidly scalable information technology platforms by companies that organize and surveil user activity en masse. The centralized role that big data and dark data had in regulatory proceedings speaks to how big data production and data contestations are a condition of politics in the age of platform companies.

Whether or not subjects were making references to missing data in bad faith or in genuine unease with their ignorance, one thing becomes clear: with privatized, large-scale, digital infrastructures, the practice of politics, public discourse, and policymaking becomes inextricably linked with dark data, which in turn, shapes future technological innovations and political possibilities. Subjects for and against regulation are animated by a techno-optimistic attachment to the fantasy that dark data would seamlessly lead to better knowledge and better policies, whether through a notion of city-company collaboration, subpoenas of companies, or even through the construction of counter-data sets to rival dark data. Big data in these interchanges and the fixation on supposedly raw data displaced, and sometimes actively silenced, other forms of political discussion. The imaginative figure of dark data is one way in which the platforms produced by startups are implicated in a "post-truth" political age.

Conclusion

In this dissertation, I have endeavored to show how the cult of meaningful work in Silicon Valley has emerged from particular economic, cultural, and historical circumstances. I have also demonstrated how the gendered categories of reproduction and production, value and work, are changing in a myriad of ways through the technology startup world of Silicon Valley and the San Francisco Bay Area. I have examined the domesticated spaces of startups as the disciplinary extensions of financialized compensation. They refigure work relations as family relations and shape affective attachments to mirror the collectively shared risk of the startup as a whole. These spaces poetically manifest what ought to be felt, and from the words of my informants, what is indeed felt—that self-interest and company interest are not only aligned but harmonized. As constant surroundings, they also discipline subjects, leaving little room for work-oppositional attachments or feelings to grow.

The home-work space enables startup work to sometimes be experienced as unalienated, and this feeling truly moves people, sometimes to the extent they feel they have "drank the Kool-Aid." These affective investments are related to changing material conditions within technology startups, not just of space but of the conditions of their employment. Ownership of equity, particularly the significant proportion of equity typical of the small team of startups, is indeed formally distinct from a model of employment in which one sells time for a wage. Startups resignify work as unalienated through this shared financial relationship, through the shared space of the

office-home, and through the affective cultivation of a family. Such affective and managerial regimes do in fact cultivate social belonging in the startup for many, but despite familial references, the belonging is contingent on performances of belonging. Deviance from racially encoded cultural norms, and for femme women beauty standards, of upper-middle class white society could compromise this performance, and thus reality, of belonging.

As financial value becomes the focus of the tech economy, the metric of quarterly performance reconfigures the relationship between work and life not just through new permutations of public and private space but through a reframing of everyday practices like eating as well. The company and its workers must be perceived as creative and innovative to perform as such, and what and how workers eat plays no small part in the process of making a company innovative. The lunch break, once a pause in being a productive person, is now seen by companies and workers alike as a means of maximizing cognitive and creative output. However, these consumption practices are socially creative acts in more ways than one. There are hidden consequences of this individual and company self-fashioning: they become expressions of status and opportunities to reify a value hierarchy of supposedly creative, cognitive work over what is increasingly viewed as uncreative, physical work. As the food service worker said, no one cares about the prep cook; as the tech worker said, no one cares about chopped carrots. This hierarchical sorting of labor is not natural but the historical reproduction of racialized, gendered hierarchies value.

For the privileged beneficiaries of the tech economy, the dominance of a newly financialized model of work, security, and compensation, are complicating these traditional economic categories even as they reproduce existing value hierarchies. It is not a coincidence that startups and large corporations alike are using these spatial, affective-managerial, and consumption practices, that upend distinctions between production and reproduction, at the same time as the category of value itself becomes increasingly abstracted from any concrete measures of productivity. On the contrary, these practical changes reflect and reinforce a financialized circuit of value production that is contingent on performance.

These changes are entirely related to the restructuring of the American economy through finance, as discussed in the introduction. Much more than income itself, speculative assets formed the motivational background in which subjects' actions make sense. The fixation on entrepreneurship is not just an expression of peculiar Silicon Valley interests, but results from a historical condition in which asset appreciation is now the primary means of how one might eventually access economic security, and employment income is a means to this end. So much of what I observed—the temporality of technologists' work ethics, the work-life intensification practices, approaches to consumption, the spatial impacts of technology on both the industry itself and the broader urban landscapes, and STVR platforms' data-driven transformation of homescapes into potential hotels—was a remaking of this relationship of life to capital through finance. It has been spearheaded in new ways in the tech economy of Silicon Valley, but the impacts are by no means exclusive to it.

Startup culture in Silicon Valley inherits its progressive ethos for changing the world from the intentional communities that preceded it. The cult of meaningful work that results from this legacy has its benefits; the belief in finding freedom through work does make work better for some. As Michael said, "when people feel creative, they feel free." The feeling of freedom, regardless of whether or not freedom is really the best word to describe working under capitalist conditions, still matters. Furthermore, meaningful connections between coworkers and affective investments in the company facilitate alternative kinships that provide social belonging, reciprocity, and a sense of purpose that rivals roles historically fulfilled by nuclear family relations. Enduring relationships made through work can even provide material security, in the form of new avenues of employment when a company goes under.

However, the intimacy of startup workplaces should not be mistaken for equality within those workplaces. It is often the case that, in American capitalist culture especially, we view exploitation and intimacy as mutually exclusive forms of relatedness. In fact, intimacy facilitates particular kinds of exploitative relations in the context of startups and, in some cases, creates new obstacles to recognizing and challenging experiences of harassment from superiors. As I demonstrated through the analysis of fraternal patriarchy, a concept of progress that pits patriarchy against the equality of brotherhood is not a passive backdrop or curious contradiction to forms of gender hierarchy in the startup workplace. On the contrary, the financialized tech economy intensifies forms of social hierarchy through the active recruitment of

progress narratives. Fraternal patriarchy in tech is reinforced through, not in contradiction with, the new spirit of brotherhood formed by the startup world's ostensible embrace of egalitarian, progressive values.

Likewise, it was not merely that STVR companies create new avenues for real estate speculation while increasing rents for renters already struggling with wage stagnation; Airbnb cultivates techno-optimism through public relation campaigns and its own public data performances because it facilitates this process. It appeals to renters as a platform that might help them get by (despite the miniscule share of rentals represented by tenants), undermines local efforts at self-determination through this attractive story, a likeable product, and publicly bolsters a privileged position of technology companies to know and do better than a group of citizens ever could. This is a different sort of technocracy than a rule of experts, who are still held to ethical standards of disavowing competing interests (although the turn to economists to provide insights into all of life's questions certainly reinforces the positive public approbation of technology companies).

The impacts of this remaking of life to capital cuts both ways in that the impacts of tech-financialized value are not merely felt at the top echelon of privileged technologists and industry workers but echo in bifurcating ways throughout the economy. Technology companies such as Airbnb create new lucrative avenues for speculative appreciation for asset owners, while it is precisely these new forms of speculation that exacerbate precarity for non-owners. Furthermore, the Silicon Valley tech economy has broader implications for others beyond this geographic slice

through the example it sets for how a successful workplace, and indeed city, should be run.

Beyond the dissertation

Good research always ends in more questions. There were many avenues for further inquiry that were beyond the limits of this dissertation, but that I remain interested in developing. The following are areas where I see potential for future research:

Appreciable assets: body and wellness regimes

A clear extension of Chapter 3 would be a broader consideration of the rise of wellness culture. Evident in American culture but particularly in the tech economy of Silicon Valley, the fixation on whole-body wellness might at first glance appear to be a privileged ameliorative practice to the everyday exhaustions of capitalism. However, I suspect that the rise of wellness has happened in tandem with financialization because of the new ways in which subjects are required to think of themselves and their bodies as assets. Some culture writers have rightly suggested that wellness is merely a new language for the feminine diet culture of the 90s—equally fat-phobic, but couched in terms of self-care, or for masculine actors, productivity optimization. There are undoubtedly aspects of fat-phobia and misogyny running through the wellness obsessions I observed in Silicon Valley, and I am interested in how these intersect with the understanding of the self as an appreciable asset. In future research, I would like to extend my analysis of financialization

beyond food and drug practices to these other aspects of self-care that I observed in the tech economy: the company-sponsored meditation sessions, group activity challenges, and in the seemingly individualized but common choices to engage in Crossfit like exercise regimes (Crossfit originated in Santa Cruz, California), regular massages, and alternative medical practices.

"You're So Tan!": Speculations on Race and Value

While a significant proportion of my informants were Asian, Black, and Latinx, I did not analyze their positionality for the most part, or how their racialized experiences resulted from or contributed to the production of financial value in the tech economy. On the one hand, this move allowed their experiences and reflections on tech to be the basis of my understanding instead of centering whiteness and marginalizing their insights into a chapter on race. I also felt that this was the representation they imagined and desired when agreeing to work with me. On the other hand, it leaves race and racism itself untreated within the dissertation.

The tech industry's centrality in American culture has placed it under increased scrutiny, more than other private industries, to improve its diversity numbers. While such demands have led to more transparency on the racial demographics of large companies, since the annual release of these numbers starting in 2014, prominent tech companies have not made much progress, particularly for Black employees. Even populations that seem to be well represented still experience different types of discrimination in larger tech companies: in February 2021, Google recently reached a $3.8m settlement, consisting of backpay and restitution, with the

196

US Department of Labor over "systemic compensation and hiring discrimination" affecting more than 5,500 female and Asian software engineers.

These racial dynamics surely play a role in shaping experiences at the scale of a small startup as well. One Latinx informant described his unpleasant experience chafing up against the whiteness of his coworkers, "She [the office assistant] said, 'Oh wow, you're so tan! I wish I could be that tan! Some people pay to be that tan.' And she ran up and put her arm next to mine, and then she asked, like, how I got that tan. I just said, 'I spent some time outside.'" This experience, which clearly affected him, also doubly burdened him with the expectation of himself that he did not conflict with coworkers. He continued telling me the story, but interrupted himself at the same time, "that made me like, like I know, she's a nice person, but that's like a, such like, a dumb comment." I would like to examine more closely these instances of racism in the startup, particularly as they intersect with prevailing ideas about social harmony and meritocracy in tech. I am also interested in how forms of racism and ideas about race are being altered in the context of changing forms of value. Whereas historically, racialization has been tied to productivity through stereotypes about work ethics and the kinds of labors people are capable of, I suspect that as value becomes decoupled from productivity and associated with the more nebulous category of innovation, new discourses of racism are emerging as well. In the future, I will investigate how racism within the tech economy is being reproduced through these new circuits of value production.

Work-life arrangements after the pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic completely altered the conditions of work in historically unprecedented ways. Large tech companies such as Google were at the forefront of making semi-permanent changes, announcing early on that they would allow all workers to work remotely for the foreseeable future. In chapter 5, I alluded to ways in which the financialized economy's concentration on speculative forms of wealth, namely real estate, are changing urban dynamics, making investment properties more lucrative and attractive to asset-owning classes, and making housing even less affordable as speculative opportunities grow and wages stagnate. The possible normalization of remote work could change these spatial dynamics and radically diversify the workforce if tech companies were to remove the requirement to live in the most expensive cities in the US. At the same time, the shortcomings of remote work, particularly in the absence of support for caregivers, has been laid bare by the pandemic. Will technology startups develop new ways of blending virtual and physical workplaces? In future research, I will investigate how pandemic working conditions might have changed the norms and expectations around blended work-home spaces, and change the social structure of the startup team.

Silicon Valley in DC

The relationship between the tech industry and formal politics has radically changed over the past decade. Although military and Department of Defense contracts had always been major funding sources for the tech industry, despite these investments, the politics of the industry leaders and professionals themselves have long slanted libertarian, voting democrat with substantial incentives from the party.

This stance of the tech industry as minimally engaging in formal politics has started to change. The Obama Administration inaugurated many roles for tech professionals to join the federal government and developed programs to promote and incorporate tech startup cultures of entrepreneurship within government itself. In addition to creating an oval office position of U.S. Chief Technology Officer, the Obama administration started the Presidential Innovation Fellowship program in 2012 to create "entrepreneurs in residence" who will "bring the principles, values, and practices of the innovation economy into government though the most effective agents of change we know: our people." These formal relationships between the federal government and Silicon Valley were further solidified by the Trump administration. At the same time, "big tech" has become politicized in new ways, with Mark Zuckerberg testifying in front of congress about the Cambridge Analytica scandal, while Airbnb, Uber, and Lyft have all successfully overcome grassroots campaigns' attempts to regulate them at the state and federal level. How will these technocratic maneuverings, and displays of tech as a special interest group in conflict with democracy, change the progressive ethos that has characterized Silicon Valley in the past? My future research might examine the transformation of tech as a public figure and of tech entrepreneurs as icons of creative capitalism through the enmeshing of the industry in formal politics.

Closing thoughts

One of the first people I interviewed was a young man named Bo who worked for one of the larger companies in Silicon Valley. Tien was a college dropout who survived a car crash at a young age, an event which he felt was formative to his life trajectory. He never graduated, but was recruited by faculty to teach undergraduate computer engineering courses. At the time in 2014, his title was Senior Director of New Ventures and Innovation Engineering, and one of his formal objectives was to encourage "disruptive innovation," then and now an overused term in the tech industry. "What even is 'disruptive innovation'?" he joked. "Should I replace all of the soap in the soap dispensers with ketchup? Is that disruptive enough?" His ability to laugh at the tech industry's love of ambiguous buzzwords did not make him any less serious or passionate about his work. At one point, Bo was explaining to me the nature of what he did, what he liked and did not like:

> Bo: I like to describe it as, we're in the business of building sandcastles. They're very beautiful in the moment, but when the next technological wave comes down, it just washes away and you just have to rebuild things… just keep rebuilding a version of the company over and over again, and each time you look back and think, at least in the moment it was beautiful or it was meaningful and people appreciated it, but at some point in time it will be destroyed and people won't even remember it. Like, do you remember what the Yahoo homepage looked like in 2005?
>
> Kao: No.

Bo: Yeah, see, somebody spent a lot of time working on it, right? And

at the time it made sense and now you don't even remember it.

You just know that it existed. And that's the business that we're in.

It strikes me that this is how reproductive labor has often been contrasted with productive labor. There is no enduring material product to point to; no one may remember that temporarily clean home or hearty meal, but it took a lot of work. At least in the moment it might have been beautiful, or at least edible, and hopefully it meant something to someone.

When I started my research, I was hopeful that these new juxtapositions and amalgams created by technology startups—turning the home into work, work into family, collapsing capitalist work-life dichotomies, and detaching material productivity from productive labor itself—might be changing gendered hierarchies of value, and potentially gender hierarchy itself, in some way. What I found is that there is indeed a transformation of the entire circuit of value in tech startups that requires we rethink traditional economic categories of analysis. Financialization is reshaping employment structures, cultivating entrepreneurial subjects in new ways, and altering easy demarcations of economic from non-economic space and time, but whether these changes upend social and economic hierarchies is not a given.

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